

The Racialization of Educational Spaces:

Exploring the Design of the University of
Colorado Boulder and its Contribution
to Racialized Experience

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis by
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Spring 2022
Program in Environmental Design, University of Colorado Boulder

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Acknowledgments

Throughout this study I received a tremendous amount of aid and support from faculty and peers in Environmental Design. Thank you all, tremendously.

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Shawhin Roudbari whose knowledge and expertise was of utmost value to my research. Your insights into the subject matter, your support, and your genuine interest in my success were imperative to my work.

I would like to thank my instructors Dr. Jota Samper and Danielle Bilot. Thank you for your aid and feedback throughout the process of my writing. You provided me with the important tools to communicate my study and shared powerful insights that propelled my work.

I also would like to acknowledge Dr. Arturo Cortez. Thank you for your time and interest in my work. The perspectives you provided were wonderful and invaluable.

También me gustaría agradecer a las dos personas que más admiro. Mamá y papá, gracias por su apoyo. Simplemente no habría llegado tan lejos sin ustedes dos.

Finally, I would like to thank the students and alumni that took part in my study. I could not have conducted this study without the valuable time you gave me out of your busy schedules. I cannot express the gratitude I feel for the stories and experiences that you entrusted in me.

Abstract

The privilege of education has historically favored the wealthy and white. However after recent decades of activism and integration, educational spaces have expanded to allow demographics that include people of color. We are now at a place where non-white individuals make up significant percentages of student populations in universities. At the University of Colorado Boulder thirty-percent of the undergraduate population identifies as Latinx, Asian, Black, Indigenous or other. Existing works discuss the racialization of space, the hierarchies that are designed and upheld in institutional racism and the overall purpose of designing an institution of that scale, but this leaves a gap to bridge: how does design of buildings and landscape contribute to that? Using CU Boulder as a focus university, this research devoted to answering that question using the method of interviewing students and alumni of the university. The subjects were asked about their perceptions and feelings in

relation to the spaces on the campus. Both white students and students of color were interviewed and while every person began their recount describing their excitement to attend the university, a stark difference in experience was revealed at the end. While the white students expressed minimal disruption to their experience, students of color expressed feelings of surveillance, discomfort and overall lack of belonging on campus. Through coding and analysis, the findings of this study concluded four major themes across the interviews: Homogeneity of the landscape, sterile spaces, safe spaces, and acceptance. After a synthesis of the findings and the literature, this study found that the design of the university campus can contribute to racialized experience. It also found that the design of the spaces is not the sole causation for this racialized experience but rather it is a product of the ideals that the racialized society we live in upholds.

Preface:

The reason behind this study

The perspective I hold as a woman of color attending a predominantly white institution was the most influential reason behind conducting this study. Because now I see that attending this university the last four years was not only a question of passing one-hundred and twenty credit hours. It was also a question of surviving a place that was not made for me. My time here has shown me that this university benefits from the people of color who attend this institution and thrive despite the extra obstacles that they face. Students who not only pay for their tuition with dollars, but pay for their right to exist here with their mental health and their conformity. It is an added cost that our white counterparts do not have, and it is simply not fair.

Prior to attending this university I was warned by many about the culture shock I would experience at an institution of this size and its

reputation of lack of diversity. I pushed past those comments because I looked forward to pursuing my education here, and growing up in a predominately white environment, I did not expect a significant change. And yet the first week I was here I came to the conclusion that I did not belong. Regardless, that first year I explored every building and space I could and I actively tried to take up space, but there was not a moment where I was not scared. The possibility that someone would tell me to leave or ask why I was there always existed. It was clear I stood out.

The most distinct thing I remember were the eyes; following me around every space I walked into. Was I wearing my shirt inside out? Were my shoes tracking in mud? I can still feel those stares and I can still sense the disruption I caused walking into a place where my efforts to be silent and respectful were not enough.

Even a third of the student population felt like an overestimation to me. To this day, walking into a space and being the only person of color in the room is not rare. I still feel like an outsider sometimes.

This study shed light on the idea that maybe the experiences I have had on this campus were not my fault, and that perhaps this is what happens to people of color in a predominantly white institution. This process was not just a learning experience but a growing one too. There were countless times where I thought this research was going nowhere, times where I felt like this study did not make sense. It was not only other people's comments that undermined my work, but my own pressing thoughts that told me my experiences were just in my head. When I began the interview process, the self-doubt began to dissipate. Hearing about another student's awareness that they don't belong here, made me feel seen. Learning about their own grapple with the legitimacy of their experiences as people of color, was validating in an indescribable way. It was these conversations where I truly understood how isolating being a person of color on this campus could be. I distinctly recall a student who shared with me her hesitation to speak out about her experience in fear people would tell her she was overreacting. That was one of the most relatable

thoughts I heard throughout the interviews and it reminded me of why I began this study in the first place.

A year after beginning this study I can admit the emotional toll this study took on me. I recall the times where someone (a white individual) would ask what my thesis was about and I would dread explaining it to them. I was scared of the reaction I would get, the push back, the mocking, and the patronizing looks. The times I did receive those reactions I had to find a way to hold my ground. It was like defending the validity of my experience as a person of color and trying to justify the importance of my work. In retrospect—unnecessary. People of color do not need to persuade anyone to understand our experience. On a different spectrum, I recall times when students of color shared their rage and frustration of being outsiders and I sat alongside them feeling the same things. I remember as one of them appeared close to tears I sat beside them holding back mine. This work was difficult, draining, and tear-inducing, but at the end of it I can say it was important to push those boundaries and challenge the structure of the Ivory Tower. Because even though it was not built for us, we exist here, and we deserve to take up space.

Table of Contents:

Acknowledgments	2
Abstract	3
Preface: The Reason Behind this Study	4
Table of Contents	6
List of Figures	8
Introduction: The Ivory Tower	10
Racism in Higher Education	
Racist Spaces at the University of Colorado Boulder	
Research Question	
Methods	
Filling Gaps and Going Forward	
Literature Review: Defining the White Space	17
Defining Racism	
The Failures of Structural Racism	
Classical Architecture and White Supremacy	
What can Design Symbolize?	
Behavior in these Spaces	
Institutional Racism	
White Spatial Imaginary	
How this applies to the design of university campuses	

Methodology	24
Participants and Sample	
Data Collection Methods	
Process of Interviews	
Data Collection	
Analysis	
Limitations	
Positionality	
Findings: Narratives of Exclusion	32
“I thought it was the most beautiful campus.”	
“It all looks the same”	
“I don’t like sterile spaces.”	
“Spaces I feel safe in?...”	
“I have the right to exist here”	
Other Forms of Racism at CU	
Discussion	40
A Glance into the White Space	
Unawareness	
Clean Versus Racist	
Academia as a White Space	
Who is this campus really made for?	
Going Forward	
Bibliography	48

List of Figures

Figure 1: Recruitment Flier, Created by Author

Figure 2: Campus Map, Edited by Author

Figure 3: CU Boulder's Roof Tiles are a Staple. Coloradan Alumni Magazine. Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://www.colorado.edu/coloradan/2019/10/01/cu-boulders-roof-tiles-are-campus-staple>

Figure 4: CASE Building at CU Boulder. Educational Snapshots. Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://educationsnapshots.com/projects/5100/university-of-colorado-boulder-center-for-academic-success-and-engagement-case/>.

Figure 5: CASE Building at CU Boulder. Educational Snapshots. Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://educationsnapshots.com/projects/5100/university-of-colorado-boulder-center-for-academic-success-and-engagement-case/>.

Figure 6: Themes in the findings translated into design elements, Created by Author

“In a racialized social system
steeped in white supremacy,
space becomes contested
ground for who belongs and
who does not, who has access
to the resources of the space
and who does not”

—David Embrick and Wendy
Leo Moore

1. Introduction: The Ivory Tower

The design of a space has power over the experience of the occupant, it can foster atmospheres of comfort or discomfort depending on the person. Translating this idea into a scenario of racial inequality, we can begin to discuss how design can intertwine with racist systems and create a hostile space for a person of color. A key place to examine in this discourse is a university campus where the occupant of the space spends a large portion of their day. In the possible twenty-four hours that a student can reside on campus they are bound to experience multiple spaces like lecture halls, offices, dining space or study areas. These spaces can be pleasant or not and that can depend on the perspective of the student. What could be the perspective of a student of color in a predominantly white university?

Starting from the beginning: we must acknowledge that the university campus was not designed for people of color. When New College (known as Harvard today) was founded in Boston in 1636, people of color were enslaved and the pursuit of intellect was limited to the white male.¹ Today people

of color make up forty-eight percent of undergraduate enrollment in the country.² To be more specific, the University of Colorado Boulder has a student population where about a third of the undergraduate students are people of color.³ This is an encouraging number, and projections indicate that number will continue to increase and more people of color will occupy higher education spaces.⁴ As the level of diversity rises in these spaces it is imperative that we ask ourselves: Do these spaces welcome and cater to all? Have they been updated to do so? If not, then this raises a flag signaling inequities that could be attributed to the built environment. This study examines the possibility of racialized experiences in an educational built environment. Utilizing the context of racism in educational institutions, background information of the focus university, and addressing the knowledge gap in the field, the Ivory Tower will be introduced.

¹ Slater, Robert Bruce. "The Blacks Who First Entered the World of White Higher Education." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 4 (1994)

² "Race and Ethnicity of U.S. Undergraduates." *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education*, October 9, 2020.

³ "University of Colorado Diversity Report 2020-2021," University of Colorado, June 2021.

⁴ "Indicator 19: College Participation Rates," Indicator 19: College participation rates, accessed December 11, 2021,

Racism in Higher Education

The idea that spaces can be racist is not new and since the doors of major institutions opened to allow people of color in, it has been a recognized and experienced reality.¹ Architecture and landscape are designed by people whose values are reflected in their work. An institution like a university prides itself on its status and power and its spaces are designed to depict its values.² But if we circle back to the notion that these particular spaces were never designed with non-white individuals in mind, then we can begin to ask ourselves what kind of values do higher education institutions have when it comes to diversity. It is important to consider that the design of a university is not limited to the tangible aspects like architecture or planning, it can extend to non-tangible things like support or inclusion measures within the institution. Universities often have entire departments dedicated to those inclusion measures. These departments serve as design elements in the academic space that is designed to represent the institution. In the case of CU Boulder's campus, there exists the Office of Diversity and Equity where their mission statement claims they aim to foster engagement and belonging for all regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity.³ Their mission statement below:

The Office of Diversity, Equity and Community Engagement works to achieve the university's commitment to inclusive excellence and uphold it as a priority across the campus...We demonstrate inclusive excellence by building a culture of belonging and engagement that fosters educational and personal success for all students, faculty and staff.

The terminology of the statement indicates careful consideration from the university's standpoint. The Office of Diversity articulates words like "commitment" and "building", all signaling proactive measures that represent

CU Boulder's commitment to advocate for inclusivity. In a more responsive form, there exists the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC). Report based, this department is committed to preventing or responding to discrimination incidents on campus. Their statement below:

OIEC is committed to preventing discrimination or harassment based on race, color, national origin, pregnancy, sex, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation, or political philosophy. OIEC is also committed to preventing any form of related retaliation as prohibited by university policies and state and federal laws.

Reading carefully curated statements like these highlighted a duality; where one side showed the university to be well-designed in all aspects, and the other side reflected the recounts from students of times they did not feel supported by these offices. Departments with proactive measures to aid diverse demographics can promise change but it is important to maintain a critical eye. Since the campus itself was designed and updated throughout the eras of segregation, Jim Crow and white supremacist control, we need to ask how much of that racist ideology is left behind in that design and values. How much of it has been updated to align with current times? It may be possible that a department of diversity does not provide sufficient help, and it is important to question this when the number of people affected grows each year.

If a space does not welcome all, then does it create room for some to be left out? In other words, when a space is not designed to be inclusive to all, then does that mean there is a group that is excluded from that space?

¹ Andrew Pilkington, "The Interacting Dynamics of Institutional Racism in Higher Education," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 16, no. 2 (2013)

² Neuman, David J. 2003. *Building Type Basics for College and University Facilities*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

³ "About Us," Office of Diversity, Equity and Community Engagement (University of Colorado Boulder, July 13, 2021)

This is not a claim, simply a reflection. And although it may sound like a riddle, it was a stepping stone to analyzing how space can highlight power dynamics. This thought alluded to the literature that was reviewed in this study, it hinted at the transformation of spaces meant for education and leisure, to hostile areas that reflected a pyramid of hierarchies.

To inform these thoughts and questions, I examined three different areas of study: institutional racism, geographies of privilege, and environmental design of campuses. By definition a university is an institution, so in the investigation of racialized spaces in universities, the topic of institutional racism was more than appropriate to study. Learning about the role that people of color play in an institution was absolutely imperative in order to understand how space is relevant and the way white and nonwhite individuals occupy it. The White Space as Wendy Leo Moore and Elijah Anderson discuss identifies a metaphorical space that alienates people of color in institutions—like universities. Moore's work focuses on the idea that white supremacy infiltrates and upholds racialization of space and hierarchical systems. The topic of geographies of privilege leans heavily on the urban and suburban geographical analysis of George Lipsitz. Let us pause for a moment, urban and suburban? Although the subjects do not directly connect to university campus design, it was worthwhile to note that Lipsitz dives deeply into the idea of privilege and the difference in the occupancy of space that white and non-white individuals have. Despite the difference in the geographical locations, the same idea of privilege and belonging connects and overlaps Lipsitz work with this study. In a way it hints us that there is a trend in the way the physical design of space creates racialized situations regardless of geographical location. The third and final area of study that was

analyzed was the environmental design of campuses. Because campus design is where the scope of the investigation lies, this area of study was critical in order to grasp what the current and past approach to campus design is. It was important to understand what is prioritized in campus design, what is the reason or mission behind design decisions. Each of these distinct areas of study was precisely chosen to support the idea that an institution can harbor racism, and that because there exists privilege in the way individuals claim and inhibit space, we must step back and examine how and why pragmatic campus design ties that racism and privilege together.

Racist spaces at the University of Colorado Boulder

For this study I chose to use the university I currently attend: The University of Colorado Boulder. There are a couple of reasons why this was chosen as the institution of focus: the first reason being that my proximity and relation to the space aided the data collection process and allowed me to connect to the participants. The second and most important was the reputation of wealth and whiteness that CU Boulder carries. The public university boasts one of the most expensive tuitions in the country and the student population census demonstrates a majority of seventy percent white students. These statistics did not need to be delineated for me to see the lack of diversity that CU has, from personal perspective, to casual recounts from students of racist encounters (even prior to the study), the CU Boulder campus had the justifications to be the center of this research.

Prior to this study I heard stories from students of color of the discomfort and harassment they experienced on campus. Stories that often depicted a person of color sitting in a space or walking around and promptly being disturbed by a white individual staring at them or ridiculing them. One particular story that has persisted throughout my years at the university is of a Latin student who shared that one time while she was walking towards the University Hill area a group of white students saw her and began to yell slurs in her direction completely unprompted. Racial incidents throughout the years have drawn the conclusion in many students of color that the campus of CU Boulder is not a safe place for them. In 2020 this widely known conclusion came to the form of art activism. CU Students Gwendalyn Roebke and Alejandra Abad displayed the “Missing BIPOC of CU Boulder”, an exhibit that featured forty black silhouette cutouts representing the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color on campus. These cutouts were placed in the Sundial Plaza at Norlin Library with writings of the disparities in retention and graduation rates, or with stories of students’ racialized experiences on campus.¹ The exhibit aimed to give students of color a place to be seen and for administration to recognize the divestment in BIPOC students. Lead artist Abad stated “BIPOC are ‘missing’ from CU Boulder, because they (university administration) refuse to take real action or acknowledge the disappearance as a result of their negligence and allowance of harm to its BIPOC community.”² Along with the display of these cutouts, the activist students laid out eight immediate actions for the university to take in order to respond to the racial inequalities at CU Boulder. One specific cutout had an anonymous story written from a black student who after seeking help from the Office of Institutional

Equity and Compliance (OIEC) received little to no response to their multiple complaints of being called a racial slur by their roommates. Referencing back to the section where offices like ODECE and OIEC were highlighted, this example of the exhibit begins to show the disconnect between the university’s efforts and the actual effect of them on students of color. Responses from the university are eloquently worded, but the action, according to students of color, is not there.

In May of 2020 the assassination of George Floyd set the country ablaze in figurative and literal forms. In response, universities scrambled to highlight their diversity and inclusion plans, and condemned white supremacy. At CU every student received a heartfelt letter from the chancellor condemning racism, and so forth, measures to improve the work and education place were discussed as students demanded change.³ The letter read the following:

As I see national news stories about the death of George Floyd and other recent acts of racism, I reflect on the conversations I had earlier this year with our students about these very issues.

Even though a global pandemic is keeping us apart from each other, I share in your pain, anger and sadness. When we see acts of racism, it affects us deeply and takes a physical, mental and emotional toll. We must reach out and support each other as we process what has happened. For me, I will not lose hope. I take heart in how our students have engaged with us over the last academic year. We had honest conversations in a genuine effort to enhance campus climate together and build a more welcoming, safe and inclusive community for all.

These intolerable injustices, whether they happen in Minnesota, New York or here in Colorado, strike at the core of everything we believe. Let me be clear: I am committed to diversity and inclusion of everyone on our campus.

We stand in solidarity with all members of our campus community, including our police department and the city of Boulder

¹ Conor McCue, “CU Students Use ‘Artivism’ to Demand Systemic Changes on Boulder Campus,” CBS Denver (CBS Denver, August 26, 2020)

² Tessa Stigler, “The Missing BIPOC of CU Boulder Art Installation Stands at Norlin Library,” RSS (CU Independent, August 31, 2020)

³ “Spring Update: Efforts to Improve Anti-Racism Policies, Safety, Resources and Support,” CU Boulder Today (University of Colorado Boulder, February 26, 2020),

in encouraging and supporting peaceful demonstrations. As a campus community, it is incumbent on us to encourage civil discourse that lifts us all from this darkness. Universities can be, and must be, at the heart of social change. As a campus, we continuously work to cultivate a diverse, inclusive and welcoming community. We best illustrate this through our moral actions when we see injustice, close to home or far away. Please take care of yourselves, each other and use our campus support resources, which continue to be available during these difficult times.
Phil DiStefano,
CU Boulder Chancellor

This phenomenon happens every so often where places like CU Boulder will commit to creating safer spaces for people of color at their institution. Exactly one year after the tragedy of George Floyd, the university sent out once again a heartfelt statement condemning racism and discussing how we can learn and heal from that tragedy.¹

Letters, departments, and commitments dedicated to supporting diverse groups are evidently in place. However, according to BIPOC students attending the university, they are not effective or true to their word. Apart from the shared experiences from students, there exists a study that also challenges CU Boulder's commitment to diversity. In 2018 an article in the New York Times was published discussing universities and their strive towards diversity and inclusion versus their actual efforts—particularly in the department of recruitment.² This article listed one hundred-fifty colleges including CU Boulder, and examined the types of schools which these universities would visit to recruit students. The trend showed that schools with median incomes of over one-hundred-thousand were prioritized over lower income schools. Not only income based, but predominantly white schools were also more likely to be visited for recruitment versus predominantly POC

schools. The article goes on to explain that these universities would often skip the recruitment in lower income areas despite the schools demonstrating the academic merit.

...when the University of Colorado Boulder visited public high schools in the Boston metropolitan area, it focused on schools in wealthy communities but skipped many poorer schools that had higher numbers of students scoring proficient in math.

The article concluded by reiterating that if schools are looking to increase socioeconomic and racial diversity in their enrollment they must cease to focus solely on white affluent schools. This was a point to reflect on, when a university advertises itself to a target audience, then is it appropriate to deduce that the university campus then is made for that target audience? In this case that audience is argued to be wealthy white individuals.

Research Question

When analyzing the design of space it is worthwhile to have an interdisciplinary approach, this way we can investigate multiple aspects of the design. For this research this meant to examine the environmental design on CU Boulder's campus as a whole, rather than solely looking at the landscape design or planning. I aimed to approach the cohesion of those disciplines and how their design as a whole perpetuates hostility towards occupations of certain demographics.

A key question in this research is how can students navigate university spaces that were never intended for them?

¹ "Student Edition - May 24, 2021," CU Boulder Today, May 24, 2021,

² Jaquette, Ozan, and Karina Salazar. "Colleges Recruit at Richer, Whiter High Schools." The New York Times. The New York Times, April 13, 2018.

A quad or a library will not display separate but equal signs above water fountains; there are no letters reading “coloreds only” painted on restroom doors in today’s designed environment. Yet according to David Delaney, space is racialized at all times. Borders invisible to the perpetrator confine those who are vulnerable and force them to exist under the dominion. If Delaney is correct that means that at the University of Colorado Boulder thirty percent of the student population is subject to those borders. This leads us to conclude the question:

How does the designed environment of CU Boulder’s campus contribute to racialized experiences among its students?

Methods

To assess the pressing question I designed a two-part interview for students and alumni at the University of Colorado Boulder. The first part was an interview where the subjects’ experiences and perceptions were discussed. The second part was a mapping activity where the students marked a space on campus they perceived as hostile or welcoming, and if possible we walked to the place itself. These discussions were done at the discretion and level of comfort of the participant and revealed some deep and personal experiences. The second part of the methods was later dropped and I will go into depth in the Methodology section. Post interview, I synthesize the data in a document to code it and find the larger themes that arose. With these primary

methods, I intended to gain a true and personal perspective of the students at this university. The methods displayed an amount of disparities and feelings of alienation in the spaces of CU Boulder that highlighted a divide between students of color and white students. Leading me to discover the implications of this study which will be further explored and discussed in this study.

Filling gaps and going forward

As more people of color enroll in higher education the need to evaluate the function of the spaces becomes pressing. Does the design of a university campus serve all its student demographics? Or does it contribute to alienation and racialized experience? Institutions that still thrive on the same values of one-hundred years ago and still pride themselves on century old designed environments that may be hostile to today’s demographics are not accidental. They were built that way to last. And it is this study’s purpose to highlight that reality and propel the conversation on how we can envision the future of campuses, ones that will include everyone.

The subject of race and racism in contemporary society is ever-present in conversations while studies of institutional racism have been written and published.¹ The design of a campus is carefully planned out and made to portray the status and mission of the institution. Geographical space is claimed by white individuals where they thrive off a system that benefits them. The literature that I analyzed supported these statements, but there is still a knowledge gap to be bridged regarding the impact of campus design on students of color.

¹ Andrew Pilkington, “The Interacting Dynamics of Institutional Racism in Higher Education,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 16, no. 2 (2013)

It is indisputable that university campuses that root from the wealthy and white can be hostile to people of color. Hostility that can be perceived to happen through policies, lack of resources or support, and divestment in diversity. However, this study aimed to investigate whether policy was the only influence in racialized experience or if there was another possible culprit that emphasized racial disparities or hierarchies. This culprit being physical design. When looking at the racialization of spaces, we cannot look past the design of space itself. Environmental design is a representation of values and ideals, therefore it is intentional. If a place of education like a university campus creates hostile environments,

then it is important to identify how the space is designed, the use, and the intention behind it. A university campus is a visual representation of the values and status of the institution, if those values contribute to racialized experiences then a solution is desperately needed. The intentions of this study are to contribute to the conversation of the oppressive tendencies of higher academia on people of color. Scholars like Wendy Leo Moore and George Lipsitz have already dove into the subjects of institutional racism and racialized space. In this research I want to dive into the specifics of those subjects and how they intertwine with higher education and designed environments of a university campus.

2. Literature Review: Defining the White Space

In this study, I explored design and its effect on racialized experience in university campuses; to best approach the topic I investigate three major categories. Starting with Institutional Racism, this meant discussing the existence of people of color in predominantly white institutions and its effects. The second category was the racialization of geographical space, examining how for white individuals space is “up for grabs”. The final category was the designed environment of university campuses, this included the pragmatic design of landscape, architecture and planning of these spaces. These three areas of exploration were strategically discussed in order to first identify the idea of racialized experience in institutions, and to then connect it to the way physical space and the campus design. The intention of this section is to analyze how space and race intertwine and thus affect the people of color existing in those institutions.

Defining Racism

Space is racialized at every moment and people of color living among these spaces have difficulty navigating them.¹ Wendy Leo Moore theorizes the White Space; a depiction

of the literal and figurative that highlights the dominion of white individuals over all and any space they inhabit.

The concept of White space captures the normative operation of race and racism in geographical, physical, ideological, and cultural space. Social science studies on racial residential segregation have long demonstrated how resources get organized around race and geography in ways that facilitate disproportionate access to economic, social, and political resources for White people in the United States.

This signals the idea that white individuals not only belong anywhere they go, but that they have authority wherever they go. It states the space as contested; coming down to who belongs and who does not. Hierarchy is recognized here; the tiers of the food pyramid are highlighted and with no exception the white individual is placed on top. The White Space can mean a place of work, education, or leisure. In this study, I am focusing on a place of education that is a university campus. A place that historically was meant to exclude demographics such as people of color who were not deemed worthy of an education. Today a space like this is particularly important to dissect, because- everyday routine can be heavily affected.

¹ Embrick, David G., and Wendy Leo Moore. 2020. “White Space(s) and the Reproduction of White Supremacy.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 64 (14): 1935–45.

Students will study, attend classes, eat meals, and even live on campus. If at any point in their routine they feel alienated or as though they don't belong, it is likely an inescapable situation where the student is forced to conform as an added cost of their attendance. When the larger percent of the population of an institution establishes dominion, it is inevitable that the minority will feel like they do not belong. Flaunting a power in numbers asserts that dominion. Think of a student who walks into a lecture hall that, for rows, does not have one person that looks like them. It may signal the need for caution when navigating the tiers. It may even inform the student where they can or cannot sit; where they can take up space or not. At a first glance, this appears like a social problem; a behavioral issue that may not relate to the design of a space. However, I argue that space informs behavior. The lecture hall in this scenario is the grounds that allow and even aid social hierarchies to thrive.

Using the same example, we can presume a tiered hall meant to accommodate three-hundred students must be designed efficiently. In this case, a designer can figure the maximum space per occupant, how the occupant will circulate through, and how they will exit the space. The storyline of the student in the lecture hall is almost drawn out along with the floor plans, but how can the narrative change for a person of color who feels the need to take caution when walking along the tiers? They may choose to sit in the dark back corner to avoid the confrontation with the White Space, or sit at the edge of the corridor to ensure a fast exit from said space. This begins to depict how the design environment can inform the behavior of the user and how racial hierarchies may be upheld. Moore and Embrick dive into this

idea; "...The entitlement to enjoy and benefit from social space is organized and guarded by Whites and disproportionately benefits Whites so that these spaces become *geographies of privilege*..."¹ In this context, any space is "up for grabs" and the limited area per person in the space is comfortably taken up by the white individual. The front rows of the lecture, the central view seats, the areas with good lighting: are all guarded.

This theory focuses on human behavior and tendencies, but it begins to highlight an important question; what is it about physical space that upholds that racial hierarchy? Is this behavior a product of its environment? Depending on who you talk to, architecture can be racist. This is a substantial claim that is backed up by the fact that racism is firmly ingrained into our society as whole. It means to acknowledge that racism, as we perceive it today, is rooted into every aspect of daily life whether that be practices, economic or educational systems.² The White Space can be a literal designed space like a lecture hall, but it can also be the invisible design of the walls of White Supremacy that confine individuals into a hierarchical pyramid.

The Failures of Structural Racism

An example that compares the idea of literal design versus the design of White Supremacy is mid century affordable housing Pruitt-Igoe. Pruitt-Igoe was a series of apartment buildings built in St. Louis Missouri where the tenants were predominantly black. As a way to combat slums and the effects of white flight, these apartments were meant to be saviors-

¹ Embrick, David G., and Wendy Leo Moore. 2020. "White Space(s) and the Reproduction of White Supremacy." *American Behavioral Scientist* 64 (14): 1935–45

² Salter, Phia S., Glenn Adams, and Michael J. Perez. "Racism in the Structure of Everyday Worlds: A Cultural-Psychological Perspective." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 27, no. 3 (June 2018): 150–55.

in the form of good living spaces. The reality was another one; the apartments were poorly maintained and were a hub for crime and bad living conditions. Decades later designers discuss what exactly led to the failure of Pruitt Igoe. The theories are endless but prominent ones have to do with the intention of space and the colorblind idea that all humans inherently have the same needs. A lack of diversity in the space seemed to have affected the diverse populations occupying said space- and that was a flaw directly attributed to the design. The democratic and Euro centric ideals which the structures were built upon alienated the people living there. Structural racism was the culprit for the failure of Pruitt Igoe and the same errors that could have been the downfall of it are commonly embedded in other designed spaces.¹ Euro centric ideals are not uncommon and the White Space could be connected to that idea, thus highlighting why people of color have a difficult experience navigating it. Birmingham describes Pruitt-Igoe as a metaphor for failed social values rather than a failed architecture. This description synthesizes the dual approach of physical design factors and societal factors that can affect a built environment; it recognizes that architecture is not the standalone rationale behind racialized space. Henri Lefevre says in *The Production of Space*: “Authentic knowledge of space must address the question of its production.”² This further argues that design and architecture cannot stand on their own in a racialized society. Birmingham goes on to bring attention to the idea that the failures of Pruitt Igoe are typically blamed on design flaws and sterile modernist architecture, ignoring the complex intertwine between the built environment and racist societal structures.

Architecture and design can be racist, but it is not a simple statement in most cases.

Classical Architecture and White Supremacy

Examples that can be argued that demonstrate racism in architecture are classical or neoclassical styles. Because of the past, styles like these have oppressive connotations. Neoclassical elements that mimic Jefferson’s Monticello can be a reminder of the building hands of slaves. Classical friezes and columns can be cold reminders of stripped Fascist monuments. A dark period in history informs us that the pristine and mathematically precise classical style was and is the preferred aesthetic of white supremacy. Fascist architecture heavily relied on the ideology of stripped facades to impose authority and suppress individuality.³ Buildings designed with fascist ideology were an icon of a greater message; an unspoken imposition that symbolized the dominion of the ideology. A Third Reich building aimed to be monumental; the rectangular forms were designed to overwhelm the user with its grandiose appearance.⁴ This meant that any impression on the user would be lasting. The architecture itself was a manifesto of ideals and a tool used to control the user. In the context of a university campus, how might classical and neoclassical architectural styles be used as a symbol?

¹ Birmingham, Elizabeth. 1999. “Refraining the Ruins: Pruitt-Igoe, Structural Racism, and African American Rhetoric as a Space for Cultural Critique.” *Western Journal of Communication* 63 (3): 291–309.

² Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.

³ Hagen, Joshua, and Robert Ostergren. 2006. “Spectacle, Architecture and Place at the Nuremberg Party Rallies: Projecting a Nazi Vision of Past, Present and Future.” *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2): 157–81.

⁴ Hagen, Joshua, and Robert Ostergren. “Spectacle, Architecture and Place at the Nuremberg Party Rallies: Projecting a Nazi Vision of Past, Present and Future.” *Cultural Geographies* 13, no. 2 (April 2006): 157–81.

A large university campus aims to practically be utilized by tens of thousands of students, thus it would be a logical notion for the campus to be designed with simple forms-and efficient layouts. It is difficult to argue against the form of 400 person lecture halls, after all the room was designed to house large numbers and do so in a cost-effective way. Practicality is logical being the true intention, but when a campus is designed in lavish Euro centric styles, it is not practical, it is decisively a demonstration of power and status. Larger-than-life Greek columns and domes that resemble a capitol building do more than just create a space to attend lecture in, they impose a power dynamic that has long been used by white supremacy. The pristine design approach, stripped of ornament and individuality may be practical and to some beautiful. However in the description lies the narrative: devoid of diversity. University campuses that have designed spaces long associated with white supremacy are the example investigated in this research. A building or campus with distinguished classical architecture may display an important reputation, but in this context, we must ask ourselves what kind of values does that represent?

What can Design Symbolize?

Higher education is rooted in white supremacy. This is not an opinion but a fact that descends from the first university founded in the United States in 1636. In the 17th century the New World thrived off the exploitation of black and brown individuals and it was possible to own another human being. Harvard University was limited to white men until 1847 when the first

black (male) student was admitted.¹ 1636 is not the limit to the stem of higher education, early settlers of the United States were merely looking to preserve old world intellectuals. The eleventh century is when the first university was believed to be established in Bologna, Italy. At that point in history, education was for white men and the church was the authority. This is the origin of higher education and throughout the centuries while authority, demographics and physical structure have changed, the foundation has not and the values are upheld. After centuries, there is a critical need for systemic change in higher education. Given all of the characteristics listed above, these institutions were not designed to withstand the progression of time. They were not made to deal with the current problems of race and diversity they face today.²

Behavior in these Spaces

Elijah Anderson takes the theory of the White Space further by acknowledging the expected behavior of people of color in the context of the White Space. In said space the black person is expected to exist there, conform and keep their head down. Yet the deemed “Black Space”, or “ghetto” where black people and other people of color reside, is often avoided by white individuals.³ This is applicable to the scenario of students of color attending a university campus where the space itself was intended for the white individual, yet in order to pursue higher education, the student must integrate into the space. The duality of the situation is troublesome; a person of color needs to yield to predominantly white institutions, while a white individual does not need the Black Space. This presents a disparity that can be explained through the phenomenon of institutional-

¹ “Welcome to the Harvard Black Community: Opinion: The Harvard Crimson.” Opinion | The Harvard Crimson. Accessed November 7, 2021

² Watson, William R., and Sunnie Lee Watson. 2013. “Exploding the Ivory Tower: Systemic Change for Higher Education.” *TechTrends* 57 (5): 42–46.

³ Anderson, Elijah. 2015. “The White Space.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1 (1): 10–21.

racism. Such can be defined as racism embedded into the regulations of an institution like an educational space. This was not prevalent until an important event in US history; integration. When institutions like universities granted further access to people of color, the phenomenon became rampant, and to this day people of color suffer the effects. Wendy Leo Moore's piece dissects what the White Space looks like in the context of prestigious higher educational spaces and discusses how institutional racism exposes disparities in a room where everyone is supposed to be equal. Institutional racism is ordinary, it is a common happening for non-white individuals.¹ Moore and Anderson conclude similarly, that the racialization of space is unavoidable and the hierarchies are difficult to escape. The space is contested at all times. From a human behavior standpoint, it may seem as though there is no way to get around the issue, but what about from a spatial perspective? If the physical environment does affect or encourage the behavior, then can it be corrected? Moore and Anderson indicate that the racial hierarchy that is upheld by individuals creates geographies of "privilege" where people of color are forced to exist. In a way, this research aims to find out if the design of a campus creates a geography of privilege.

Institutional Racism

After the height of the civil rights movement, the idea of Institutional Racism was coined by Ture and Hamilton, who studied the phenomena post-integration.. "They observed that these demographic changes did not result in racially equitable social institutions, or in meaningful material changes to distribution of institutional resources."²

¹ González, Juan Carlos. 2007. "THE ORDINARY-NESS OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM: The Effect of History and Law in the Segregation and Integration of Latinas/os in Schools."

² Ture, Kwame, and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

³ Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2011. Accessed October 4, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

This refers to one of the first questions this study asked about the update to the spaces once people of color began to be included. Their findings confirm that institutional spaces are still not made for the person of color, reflecting the White Supremacy that is ingrained not only institutionally but societally. This supports the idea that racialized space cannot be avoided in a racialized society. David Delaney argues further, talking about the hierarchies of race in spaces as well as the power dynamics that are imposed. He states that being white in a space means being unmarked and untouchable, taking the idea of hierarchy in space that much further. This leads to the idea that contrastingly, being a person of color in a geographically white space leaves one to be vulnerable. It leaves one to feel out of place and with lack of control or authority, similar to being the 30 percent minority in a large university campus. George Lipsitz describes racialized space in depth, saying the power is not only in the white individual, but in every physical contour and space we reside in, where whiteness is followed by a reward. A reward that although not endorsed by all white individuals, it is collected by all.³ In this passage Lipsitz describes the "reward" as the privilege of being a white individual in a space and having a sense of belonging. He explains that although not every white individual endorses the idea of white dominion, every white individual does benefit from that privilege. He discusses this notion in the context of suburban places and real estate discrimination, not in an educational context. However his ideals still hold value in this study because he describes the evident privilege of white individuals in a space in such a way that reflects similarly to Moore's piece on educational spaces. This signals a conclusion that any and all space truly is racialized at all times, despite location and geography.

White Spatial Imaginary

The findings of George Lipsitz weigh heavily on the topic of institutional racism because they relate to the privilege and racial hierarchies that Moore and Anderson talk about. Although he describes unequal and unjust geographies of opportunity in the suburban context, his findings can be applied to higher academia. The correlation between his work and Moore and Anderson's depicts these ideas extending past the suburbs. In his discussion we learn that although not every white individual actively contributes to the racialization of space, every white individual indeed benefits from the association of white spaces and privilege.¹ These benefits can be recognized to come from the segregated past as the Imaginary also connects to the Psychological Wage that Du Bois refers to in his essay *Black Reconstruction*.² In his writing, Du Bois's term of Wage is described as the incentive that white individuals receive simply for being white. The metaphorical Wage allows opportunities wherever the individual may go, and in this context suggests the ease that white students navigate the White Space with. This alludes to the idea that space does not solely exist on its own. Space and the way it is inhabited is designed, created, and upheld. The Psychological Wage is a factor that directly reflects the "reward of whiteness" Lipsitz talks about and upholds the behavior in the White Space that Anderson discusses as well as the claim on space that Moore talks about. It is difficult to separate the work from the designer in a racialized system, when the work was created with a purpose. For example, this could begin with the pragmatic design decision to make a sidewalk two and a half feet wide. When a dominant individual walks by taking up the two and a half feet width, they create the space

as their own and the constrained individual upholds it. The white imaginary recognizes literal space as proprietary despite the existence of others because it knows the white individual has always belonged there. A similar thing could be attributed to a bench or work table at a university; a space exists and a claim is laid upon it with few to no challengers.

Delaney's points do not stray far from the theories Moore and Anderson discuss, yet through this lens, the behavior now has a physical space attached to it. Delaney discusses the idea that geographic location may differ, yet the space that race makes can share similarities. The context in which he explains this idea is the racial minorities that exist in different parts of the world and how despite residing in different corners of the world, their experience of racism and white colonialism have commonalities.³ This can be interpreted in two forms: if physical space despite its literal difference can be tied together by racial hierarchies and white supremacy, it may argue the idea that the design of a space does not matter when it comes to racism people experience. But in contrast, it once again supports the idea that any and all space is constantly claimed by racial hierarchies. Design decisions are a part of creating space, and therefore cannot be separated from the racialization of space. Whether Delaney's points challenge or support my research, they raise important questions.

How this applies to the design of university campuses

¹ Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.

² Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1935.

³ Delaney, David. 2002. "The Space That Race Makes." *The Professional Geographer* 54 (1): 6-14.

To avoid limiting this research's potential it was important to not only review the theoretical or intangible, but also the pragmatic and physical aspects. Reading into the design of a university campus is a crucial aspect because it gives validity to the study through the lens of tried and true methods and intentions of campuses. The design of a university has certain objectives as does all design; it composes the setting of the institution's mission, it creates an identity for students and faculty, and it portrays the status of the institution.¹ Those three objectives are very powerful as it is a meaningful task to design a space that creates identity and status.

Moore argues that racial hierarchies are highlighted in any space at all times, if so, then how does that idea connect with the design intent of universities? Does the intention behind the design uphold racial hierarchies in its attempt to design for distinction and status? Blatantly, a college campus is not designed to alienate groups of students, in modern day it is hard to imagine a plan to design a campus to exclude certain demographics. Could it mean instead that it is not the planning of a space that highlights these racial hierarchies but instead the lack thereof? It is possible that these designs are not thought of ahead and do not account for the behavior of students in these spaces.

An institution will design its spaces according to its goals and values, so then at what point do those values turn against the people of color affected in these settings? Could it be the "one size fits all" approach to design? Or could it be the hierarchies that are embedded into the university frame? The objectives of the design of a university campus can be seen as Utopian, they reflect novel approaches to educational space and promise an enjoyable environment to its scholars.² On a contrasting side, Moore and Anderson make the case that despite

the intention of a space, the white space is dominant and people of color are forced to exist in it. This is the intersection I aim to investigate in my data collection. If a space is designed with a positive intent, then at what point does it turn out to be an unpleasant experience for the people of color attending the educational institution? This stems back to the idea that the educational setting was never meant to accommodate people of color. And currently, hundreds of universities still only make an effort to recruit in white affluent communities, signaling the conclusion that these spaces are still not maintained for people of color. The design can be identified as practical and cost-effective but it is not made with everyone in mind and instead approaches the solution with a colorblindness.

The three areas of study identified in this literature review aim to bridge racism in institutional spaces and the design of a university campus and analyze that intersection. From angles that study the inescapable racial hierarchies of a space, to the idea that racial relations can make the space, to the purpose and design of a university campus. This composition of sources informs the hypothesis of this research. The idea of the White Space and the power dynamic it imposes on people of color combined with the idea that people of color have to conform to their surroundings no matter their place on the pyramid, fuels the ultimate question; how? In what way do these theories hold true? What is the cause for that happening if not the environment it happens in? That is why in order to take the theories and discussions of this subject, I chose to investigate how the designed environment of a university campus contributes to racialized experiences among its students.

¹ Neuman, David J. 2003. *Building Type Basics for College and University Facilities*. John SWiley & Sons Inc.

² Neuman, David J. 2003. *Building Type Basics for College and University Facilities*. John S Wiley & Sons Inc.

3. Methodology

In order to study racialized experiences of the CU Boulder campus, I employed a qualitative approach to data collection through interviews from current students and alumni at the University of Colorado Boulder. I sought personal connection to draw out the feelings and perceptions of the students so I turned to interviews that were bound to provide more detailed recounts and answers versus a survey or questionnaire. Studies like Elijah Anderson's *White Space* piece used interviews with human participants as well, and in result derived bold and personal quotes to support his claim on the experience of black people in white racialized space. In efforts to have a study as true and detailed as possible, this method made the most sense.

Participants and Sample

The interview subjects I searched for were students currently enrolled in the University of Colorado Boulder as well as graduated alumni. I expected the two types of students to provide different kinds of insight. For example, a current student who still spent a majority of their time on campus was bound to have fresh experience that could have been recalled or interpreted easier. Current or unprocessed feelings of racialized experience

had the potential to display the emotions of the student. On the other hand, an alumni who had not recently reflected upon their time as a student could have perhaps interpreted their experience through a different or more mature lens. Both students of color and white students were recruited in order to create a comparison in the data. In addition, both male and female participants were welcomed, although I understood there would be differences in their answers, I did not anticipate they would have a significant effect on a study about race. The reason behind these choices of sample was because I envisioned that the range in the subjects could let me detect themes in the data if there were any.

Recruitment was done in two forms: snowball sampling and flier recruitment. I designed a flier and devised a recruitment email for the general pool of students, all which was included in the protocol. Figure 1 shows the design that was used. The fliers were strategically placed in bulletin boards of high traffic areas as well as emailed to key offices or newsletters. This included the Center for Inclusion and Community (CISC), the Black Student Alliance, UMAS y MECHA, and the Ethnic Studies Department newsletter.

The snowball sampling method proved to be the most effective, from peers in the Environmental Design and ATLAS programs, to alumni connections. In my limitations section I will go into depth on the success and lack thereof of these recruitment efforts.



Figure 1. Recruitment poster for this study.

Data Collection Methods

The nuances of racial experience are complex. How one person experiences racism can be different from another, and those differences can come in many forms. For example, an individual may perceive microaggressions more than the next, prompting diverse responses. I sought that detailed information and that range of responses that would reveal the truths and raw emotions of being a person of color in a predominantly white institution.

Because the recounts of students were likely to be particular to them, I anticipated that creating a space for open-ended conversations would be the most effective. That is why to answer my question I turned to qualitative data in the form of unstructured interviews. Russell Bernard recommends this method of data collection to learn about a subject's lived experience in his book *Social Research Methods*.¹ He goes on to describe how an unstructured approach creates the opportunity to build a trusting connection with the subject. I found this to be a compelling reason to proceed with this method because of the sensitive topic that would be discussed during the interviews. I foresaw that being able to relate to the interviewee would perhaps put them at ease.

In order to conduct interviews with human participants, I completed CITI training, a course meant to educate researchers on appropriate and ethical practices. In that course I learned about the effects and distress that research procedures can cause on a human participant if not carefully thought out, and thus learned about proper approaches to sensitive topics. The nature of my study had the potential to cause distress on a participant since talking about racial experiences may not always be an easy thing to do for everyone. Therefore apart from completing the CITI training course I also completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol that outlined my research procedure and anticipated any setbacks or issues. The IRB protocol included the overall purpose of the study, a detailed description of the process, recruitment materials, and potential problems. This development required multiple iterations in order to get approved, my own document was sent back twice with requested edits to clarify my study.

¹ Bernard, H. Russell (Harvey Russell), 1940-. *Social Research Methods : Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, Calif. :Sage Publications, 2000.

In the end my protocol included a detailed outline of my recruitment pool, interview material, and my recruitment and post-interview material. And Since the data would be later de-identified, I did not provide written consent forms and instead verbal consent sufficed.

Process of Interviews

The process was designed to have two components; a dialogue interview where I asked questions and probed answers from the subject, and a mapping exercise where I showed the participant a map of campus and asked them to mark places of comfort and discomfort. If the participant felt comfortable we would then walk to the physical location that provoked their feelings and further discussed their thoughts. It later turned out that most students preferred not to engage in that mapping segment so after a few interviews that method was dropped from the study. This was not a concern to my data collection because I found that the students appeared more comfortable in the isolated setting of the interview. Being in a public setting did not seem to encourage the participant to speak more and in retrospect, the first couple of interviews that included the mapping activity were not more fruitful than the ones without.

The dialogue portion of this method focused on asking the student questions related to their impressions of the university campus. The idea was to begin their reflection on the campus from their first time visiting, to their present occupation of the space. This was meant to make the subject think about the facade of the campus and then its true function or identity. I asked them moderate questions like “What was your first impression of the university?”, instead

of immediately going for the low-hanging fruit of asking if they thought the campus was designed in a racist way. I was also mindful of the questions containing design or architecture jargon, as my interview pool was not intended to be only design students. The thing about designed space is that it is less experienced by the designers and more so by the occupants who are bound to know nothing about the process of designing a building or landscape. Since the students were not expected to have a background in design, the questions were not worded in terms of architecture or planning but rather lived experience. I tried to focus on the notion that being inside a building or spending time outside on a landscape can affect mood or level of comfort. Ultimately the feelings of the students were the driving factor during the interviews, and from those conversations new themes arose that I had not anticipated. These interviews were held in person and on Zoom to accommodate COVID-19 safety precautions. When they were held in person, isolated tables or corners of the Environmental Design building were the locations used. Via Zoom, I took the calls from my house where I was sure to offer the participant privacy. Listed in the next page is my guide for the conversations. I provided “big idea” questions that asked specifics like perception from campus tours or feelings of not belonging. I also included probes to aid the flow of the conversation, I would resort to them when a subject was hesitant or had trouble articulating details. As shown below, the questions started out broad alluding to the very beginning of the subject’s experience at CU Boulder. They continued to build upon the trajectory of their time on campus to finally conclude on their perception of the university spaces in the present day. The reason behind the flow of this guide was to create a framework for the participants to paint their narratives.

What was your first impression of CU Boulder's campus?

Probe: *Did you like it?
Did you think it was nice?
Fancy?*

How much time do you spend on campus? Has the amount of time changed in the year(s) you have been here?

Probe: *Do you stay after classes to hang out, do you like to do work in the libraries, lounges, etc?*

Were there any feelings invoked when you were walking around campus the first time? Have they changed?

Probe: *Were you excited to attend here?*

Probe: *Did you imagine yourself spending time in the study areas? The rec? The libraries?*

How welcoming do you feel this campus to be? Is it as welcoming as it was marketed towards you? (campus tours, student welcome, etc)

Probe: *Freshman welcome often sells the campus experience as a dazzling exciting thing, do you think it's changed since that first introduction*

Are there any experiences you have had on campus where you felt like your race was determining?

Probe: *are there specific spaces where it happened?
Do you feel included here?*

The interviews were loosely structured and these were talking points to propel the discussion. On average each interview took forty minutes. I began every interview by asking the first question listed above, but not every conversation ended the same way. There were multiple times where the conversation did not follow these guidelines as the participants dove deeper into their stories—this made for some of the most interesting discourses. Some interviews displayed little emotion or thoughtfulness to the questions despite the probes, but others created stirring dialogue. One distinctive interview provoked such a sentiment that I had to hold back tears. The subject so carefully reflected on the questions I was asking that they appeared emotional in their recounts. The tone of this interview was not unpleasant or uncomfortable, rather it was honest and it showed the reality of racial experience for a person of color.

This conversation was a point that reminded me of why I began this study in the first place, it was also a point where I was shown how powerful this method could be.

The concluding segment of the interview was supposed to include a mapping exercise where the subject was provided with an 11x17 copy of a campus map. They were asked to mark a space where they felt comfortable and safe, versus a space they didn't. At the participant's choice, we walked to the marked space where we further discussed the provoked feelings and studied the characteristics of the designed space. The point of this activity was to aid the subject in remembering experiences while existing in CU's campus space. However, I found that by simply talking about the space the subjects had no trouble remembering or pinpointing their feelings and being in the physical location was not necessary. Factors such as discomfort and being seen in those spaces most likely contributed to their decisions, which was a piece I included in the IRB protocol. The campus walks might have seemed daunting, making the participant feel more at ease discussing the questions in a private space, therefore as I explained above the segment was dropped for the rest of the interviews. The figure in the next page shows the map that was provided.

Data Collection

Because of the sensitivity of these conversations, I opted to not collect recordings and used extensive handwritten notes instead. To protect the identity of the participants and respect the things they shared with me I kept a journal specific for this study. In that journal I scribbled the notes I took during interviews and did preliminary coding later on. This proved to be a difficult form of recording because of how fast participants often talked, it was hard to write everything down while continuing to listen. My notes were visible to the student at all times so they could see the things I was writing, and those were the only times anyone other than me got to see that journal.

To be more efficient, I would write the big ideas that were discussed in that journal and then I typed up smaller details in my reflections on a Google document only I had access to in order

to protect identities. The document included standout quotes, feelings, reactions, and body language that the participant displayed in each interview. I would also write the overall tone I sensed and the viewpoints I gained from the conversation. These reflections were a time-sensitive practice, the longer I waited to write them, the less retention I had of the conversation. That is why I wrote down those details and observations immediately after the interviews were over.

Analysis

As an early stage of coding the data I collected I kept note of buildings or spaces and key words the participants mentioned. For the formal coding of the data I began by going back to the written notes to underline, highlight and scribble important thoughts narrated to me. I looked for trends in the spaces on campus and feelings that were shared.

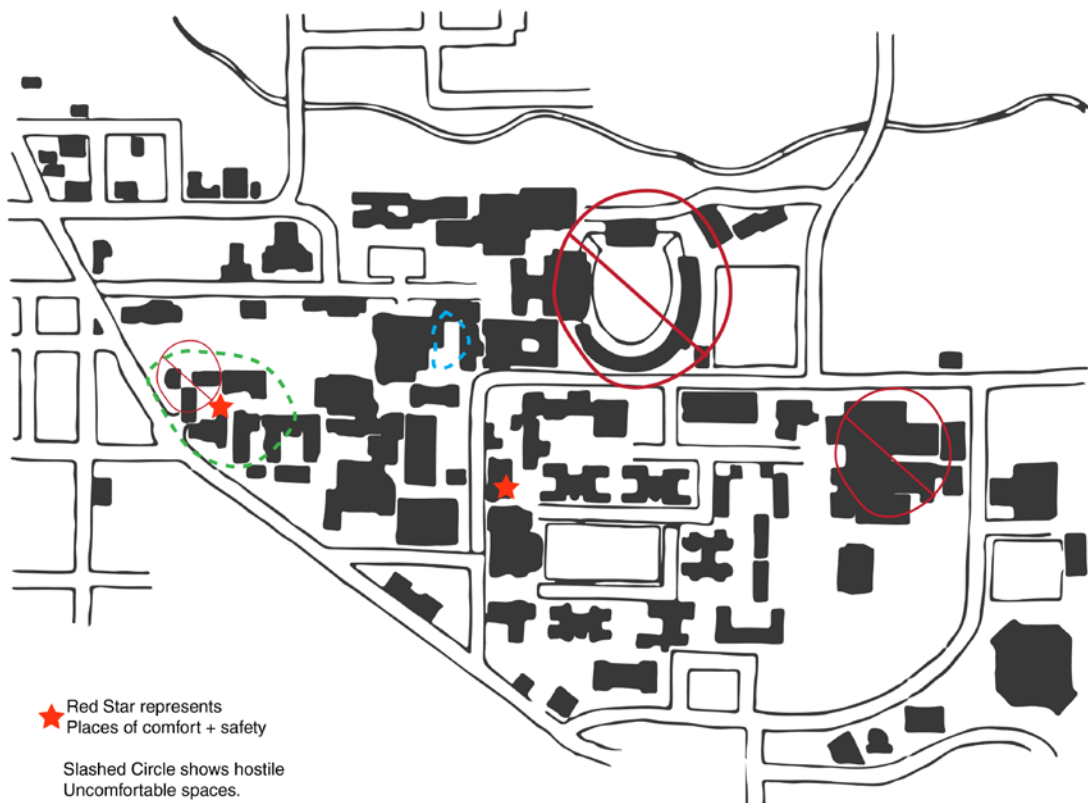


Figure 2. Campus map

The next step was to type out the handwritten notes into a digital document to prepare the data and identify the themes. This made the messy handwritten data easier to read and analyze and keep track of. In efforts to continue protecting the participant’s identity, each interview was typed out next to its reflection in a cloud document only I had access to still. The reason behind this was that each interview was not yet de-identified and the information could have been personal to some of the participants. Coding the data was a process of three stages. An early stage was marking and reviewing the interview notes by hand after my reflections. In the second stage I took the time to clean up the notes and type them up into a Google document to make them easier to read. Once the interviews were organized on the document, I read through each conversation and identified key statements to condense into a word or phrase in the form of a hashtag. The third and final stage of my analysis consisted of me gathering the hashtags and key information of each interview and organizing it all on a table. This layout helped me distinguish each interview while also allowing me to recognize any themes in the data. The table was organized in four categories: the (de-identified) details of

the participant, feelings they mentioned, direct quotes, and the hashtag themes for that specific conversation. Another thing that helped me find themes and draw comparisons was highlighting feelings or ideas when they came up more than once. This helped to really see what kind of themes were present across the data. The figure below shows how I identified the participants in categories of gender, age, and race with the intention of identifying the differences and possible intersections.

In the end, I was able to determine four main themes across the data. These included homogeneity, sterility, safety, and acceptance. These were themes that appeared multiple times in the interviews and began to shape this study. In the findings section I will go into depth for each of these categories.

Limitations

As any type of research this study had a few setbacks and limitations. In the recruitment portion a noteworthy limitation was the type of participant that was interviewed.

Interview #1	Feelings	Quote	Themes
Male, Latino, alumni	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Had to keep calm● Looking forward● Different● Isolated● Rage● Discomfort● Impostor	“I have the right to exist in this space”	#existing #nice campus #isolated x2 #entitlement #unwelcoming #daunting #architecture #large versus small #homey #belonging #comfort #familiar #separation

Table 1. Example of data organization

The recruitment section talks about the flier and snowball sampling methods that were taken and mentions that snowball sampling was the most effective. The reasoning behind this was that the general pool of students that was being targeted was not responding well to the flier. It was posted around campus as well as emailed out to key offices and organizations like CISC, the Black Student Alliance, and UMAS y MECHA (United Mexican American Students and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán). However, there was little to no response from them leading the study to lean on standing personal connections. This meant that a majority portion of the students or alumni interviewed were people I personally reached out to affiliated with the Environmental Design program. This was not necessarily a negative thing. However, because Environmental Design Students are familiar with architecture and landscape design styles there was some concern that their knowledge could sway their answers. Because this was a possibility, the interview questions were not presented with design language. Having students without formal training in architecture or landscape design was important data to collect because their answers were reduced to their feelings and perceptions. Where a design student with a background in architecture and design can view their space with a different, more informed lens.

Another limitation to this study also has to do with recruitment. This time in the amount of participants instead of the type. Lack of response from students as well as the overall time there was to collect data limited the amount of people this study was able to reach. I firmly believe that this study would have benefited from conducting dozens more interviews considering the university has over 33,000 students. A study of a dozen participants like this one has the potential to expand and collect a lot more data. A reason

why the pool of participants and the number was limited possibly had a financial factor. This study did not have any sort of funding that could have been offered as an incentive for students to participate, thus I conclude that may have been a big limitation in recruitment.

Positionality

My identity as a woman of color dictated the very reason to conduct this study. The methodology portion of this research was a process that generated a multitude of feelings for me. I found that sitting down with another person of color and having meaningful conversations about what it felt like to exist in higher academia was extremely validating. But this was also a very daunting approach to collecting data for me. Taking up space and asserting presence were key ideas in this study and were precisely things I grappled with in my own experience. I learned that sitting down with a white student and listening to their experiences on this campus was eye opening and even shocking. Hearing a student unapologetically talk about claiming a space and making it theirs had hints of privilege and entitlement and I did not expect to witness that so blatantly. An implicit bias I may have had throughout the study was that most or all white individuals I would interview would respond similarly to the questions. The bias I knew I had was that white students experienced the university differently than students of color. At all times I actively strived to check that bias. Especially when the participants who shared their confidence to take over a space took me aback.

Interviewing white students, I presented the questions as neutral and clear as I possibly could.

While interviewing students of color I made sure to approach every question with the same neutrality, however once receiving a specific response I allowed myself to relate to them. In this case my identity aided me in these conversations because the students of color often seemed more at ease to be speaking to someone who looked like them and had similar experiences. I was very conscious of maintaining the integrity of this study and therefore I focused on using my personal connection to the subject as a way to propel conversations rather than seeking specific types of answers.

As a person with a design background I have spent much of my undergraduate years studying space and the way it is created and used. I had a background in architectural styles and had developed a perspective on their exclusion. I understood why neoclassical buildings could make someone feel out of place, or why a sterile space could feel uncomfortable. When asking questions I knew the answers I would give if someone asked me the same thing, I had a personal perspective on the subject and that was an important thing I kept in check during my study.

4. Findings: Narratives of Exclusion

As a person of color attending this university, part of me expected the outcome of this study would demonstrate that the campus design of CU Boulder does indeed contribute to racialized experience. Another part of me did not anticipate that. The reason behind this duality was the isolation that comes with being a minority on a predominantly white campus; I rarely spoke up about the racial disparities I felt because I thought I would be exaggerating. As I began to have these meaningful conversations, this dual stance was challenged. I began to see how others also felt the same way I did. One student shared that she never really spoke up about her experience either because she was afraid others would perceive her as complaining. It led me to realize how often people of color second guess themselves in settings like these, feeling like the majority will not care about or understand their struggle.

This realization was reflected across the findings, as I dove into analysis of the data I found four principal themes: homogeneity, sterility, safety, and acceptance. The findings start from the intended point of the students' reflection of their first time on campus, where they talk about the allure of CU Boulder. The themes build up on each other, going on to show how the perceptions of some students are

changed through their lived experiences. Finally leading up to the acceptance of the place they have here at the university. While some stories were not surprising and instead familiar, others were shocking to hear.

"I thought it was the most beautiful campus."

Participants first reflect on their first impressions of CU Boulder's campus to their current perception. The first question that was always asked was what they thought about the campus the first time they saw it. Each person answered similarly, describing the fascination they felt on their first time on campus. At the very first glance into the university the participants described how nice the spaces were and how excited they were to attend. The Tuscan vernacular style and the cohesiveness of the campus were mentioned more than a few times. "The architecture was beautiful", "I liked how everything matched", were among the things students shared.

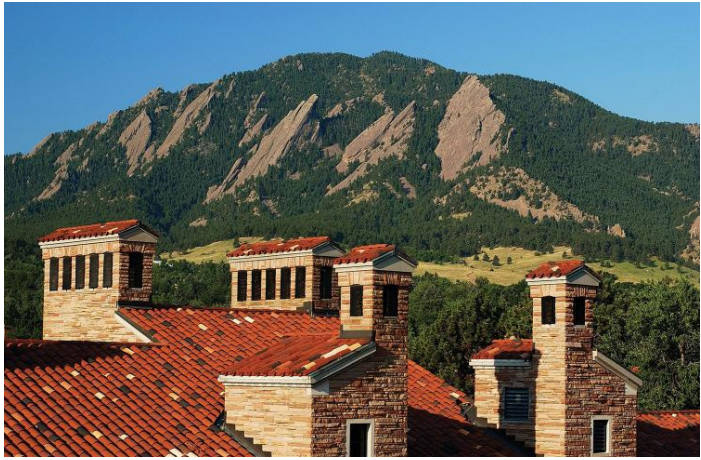


Figure 3. University of Colorado Boulder
Tuscan Style

However the real insight to this whole idea was that not everyone concluded with the same sentiment. When analyzing the responses to this question and comparing the procession of the interview it was found that the appreciation for the university campus did not falter in any of the white students' retellings. On the other hand, most of the students of color reflected a revelation on their initial response after talking about their struggles as people of color in a white institution. One student discussed the change in their outlook on the campus, they described how prior to attending and even the initial months of being a student they appreciated the campus architecture. After being well involved in their life as a student, they had the realization of just how homogeneous the design of the spaces were and how much they did not like it. Unprompted, a current student stated that same word multiple times during his interview: "homogeneous". "This university is made up of homogeneous spaces and homogeneous people, it is not inviting." Similar stories were shared across the conversations of this study where the initial charm of CU Boulder wore off after a while. The way students described the red sandstone and terracotta tiled roofs found on most parts of campus went from a marvel to realization that the similarity in the architecture and

landscape reflected the student population. One graduate student discussed their initial comfort and appeal to the campus design. On the day they moved into their dorm, the place that would be home for the next few years seemed inviting and beautiful. The multitude of white students and the lack of students of color did not raise an immediate flag, and instead they described how a group of sorority girls helped them carry bags and boxes to their dorm. The student felt welcomed. That feeling went on to change within a few weeks when they realized the facade of the university began to fall. They noticed the absence of diversity everywhere; the buildings, the people. During interviews like these that revealed a found distaste for the homogeneity of the campus, I wondered why that would have an effect on the students. How could the similarity of the architecture across the campus create discomfort? From the tone and responses the students gave, it appeared that the homogeneity of the physical environment further contributed to the lack of diversity on campus. It fueled the idea that there was little room to be different.

"It all looks the same"

Homogeneity was a word that stuck out in multiple conversations. Previously mentioned, the fascination over the architectural style and cohesiveness of the buildings was a common theme in the beginning portion of the interviews. The word "cohesiveness" was pronounced with a positive connotation, while the transition to the word "homogeneous" hinted at an antagonistic tone. A student described the campus to be "too homogeneous", saying it was reflected on both the landscape and the people, fostering uninviting spaces.

And their claim was evident: CU Boulder has a strict design code that inevitably includes sandstone facades and red barrel tile roofs.¹ Most buildings do not deviate from that, displaying the same aesthetic everywhere, thus severely lacking diversity in its forms. Another student touched on the Tuscan vernacular architecture, saying it was contradictory. He explained that on a trip abroad Italy, he saw first-hand the architectural style in its origins. Seeing the authentic use of it, versus seeing it on a university campus in Boulder, Colorado did not make sense. The university being one of the most expensive in the state of Colorado has an association with wealthy “one-percenter” students and Tuscan Vernacular, he described: is not associated with money. A vernacular style, implies the use of local materials and forms that are more functional than extravagant. This was an interesting observation that had been mentioned to me by a professor as well. Referring back to the discomfort some students described in the homogeneity of the campus design, it was intriguing to see the discourse on the architectural style when most of the students voicing their critique initially said they liked it. This was a key moment of progression in the narratives of these interviews.

“I don’t like sterile spaces.”

A second topic that came up in the interviews was the idea of sterile space. Described as pristine environments that flaunt gleaming floors, white walls, cold lights, and silence. Elements like these were described to have the potential to instantly pinpoint a person who did not belong in the space. In spaces like these, the silence can amplify any sound a person makes, the bright and open entrances make anyone

who enters the space a focal point. When hearing the disdain some students had for areas like these, I had no trouble putting myself in their shoes. Ornamentation and color are not necessary and actually excluded because these spaces are designed for efficiency rather than character. In *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor argues that modern western society fears color. In his second chapter, Batchelor asks an important question: “If colour doesn’t matter, why does its abolition matter so much?” His pondering immediately drew a connection to sterility where the sensation students described was not simply clean, it was almost aggressively exclusive. His book dove into a detailed description of the color white and its presence in western culture. “Tyrannical White” was a compelling way to describe an inescapable color that is so pure it makes its surroundings appear inferior.² The way he illustrated color captured the way sterile space could be described—superior. In my head there were multiple locations across CU’s campus that could fit the description participants gave. The CASE building: a study, event, and advising space that is open to all but not used by all, was a specific place that was mentioned throughout by both the participants and I. The CASE is relatively new and is located centrally on campus so it was a place every participant was familiar with and had an opinion to contribute on.

The topic of sterility, although relevant, was not initially covered in the questions. Interestingly enough, sterility came up on its own. The first two people that were interviewed talked about the subject in such an impacting yet distinct way, it became clear it had to be included in the rest of the study. Sterile space came up in the first conversation when an alumni (Latin male) mentioned their discomfort in spaces with that character.

¹ Deno, William R, and Steven C Thweatt. “CU-Boulder Main Campus Design Guidelines.” Boulder: University of Colorado at Boulder, Office of the Campus Architect, April 2007.

² Batchelor, David. *Chromophobia*. London, England: Reaktion, 2013.

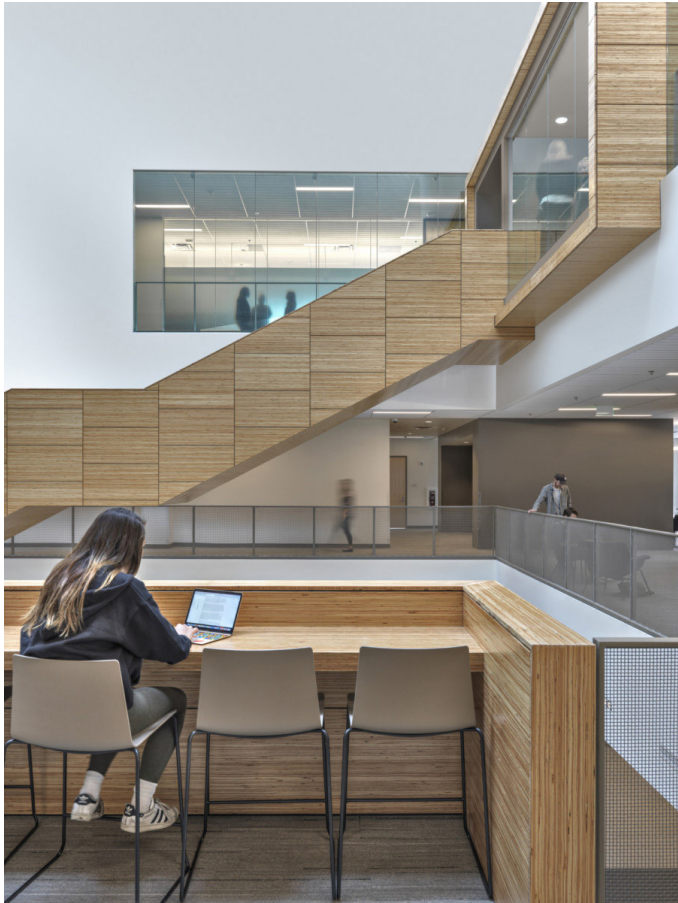


Figure 4. Center for Academic Success and Engagement

To them the white walls were stripped of individuality, the silence in the hallways was exposing, and the feeling of being an outsider was twice as evident. They recognized that sterile space could be clean, bright, and modern to some, but described those same elements could easily turn around and become hostile. The participant reflected on the feelings of surveillance he felt when he walked into most places, as a male of color he felt that his presence was evident and caused discomfort for the white individuals in that space. He went on to describe how he learned to read the room and the stiffness that his white counterparts would reflect when he sat down at a table or walked into a room. This made him go into a constant “survival mode”, that had to be amplified in the exposure of sterile spaces.

By contrast, in an interview with a current student (white male), they explained how new, clean, sterile spaces were a comfort to them. It was an unclaimed space that they felt allowed to exist in. They noted that “sterile spaces are not worn-in yet, so they are easier to claim.” This narrative led me to reflect once again on the literature that was reviewed previously. Wendy Leo Moore described the claim that white individuals can lay on any space they encounter. In this case the unblemished design of a sterile space laid out a desirable condition for it to be claimed. The alluring detail to this discourse is that the interviewee did not sound imposing when they stated their feelings. It did not appear to be a matter-a-fact response; it was nonchalant and almost innocent. This thought lingered for the rest of the study and it raised new interpretations. George Lipsitz described the way white individuals participate in behaviors of privilege whether they notice or not, and this situation appeared to be one of those cases.¹

Another interview with a student revealed a similar stance on sterile space, this time it was a white female. This was important to note because prior to data collection there was an anticipation that there would be a difference between male and female participants. In this case the thoughts this student shared had the same basis. They shared that “a sterile space gives the opportunity to leave your mark.” This follows a trend of certain entitlement that starkly contrasts the tellings of students of color. One side of sterility displays the implied invitation to take up the space; the idea of a place that “has not been broken into” signals the availability to claim.

¹ Lipsitz, George. 2011. *How Racism Takes Place*. Temple University Press. Accessed March 14, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

On the other side there is the notion that existing in sterile spaces follows the person around like a spotlight, where they feel like all eyes are on them. The students with a preference for sterile space discussed the intention of taking up that space and leaving a mark, while other students discussed the opposite idea of trying not to “ruin” the space.

The preference or dislike for the sterile places that CU Boulder has to offer was not the key idea here, it was in fact the reasoning behind the preference. More than one person of color that was interviewed shared their fondness of studying in the CASE building, a place that I previously identified as a recurring subject of sterility. An alumni described that they preferred spaces like that for focus work because of the lack of distractions. A current student shared that although it made them uncomfortable to walk into quiet spaces like that, they ultimately enjoyed working in sterile spaces because of the feel of cleanliness in the areas. That same person did however describe that although clean spaces had a positive effect on them, spaces like the CASE building should have more color or cultural representation. That thought raised a point of reflection in the study, it challenges that perhaps clean and efficient spaces do not necessarily have to be exclusive. A space could be clean, quiet, efficiently designed, without painting a bleak environment where people of color feel excluded. One alumni said it simply: “If people are going to inhabit a space; spend time in it, then it should not be cold and sterile.”

“Spaces I feel safe in?...”

To contrast the austerity of some spaces on campus, students and alumni also shared the spaces they found comfort and belonging in. Across multiple interviews participants

confirmed that CU Boulder does indeed have a place of belonging for everyone—it just has to be searched for. I found the stories that students or alumni of color shared to be bittersweet as they described their safe places to be some of the only spaces they felt respected. These places consisted of daily routine locations like student offices, club meeting locations, study spots, or workplaces. A thought that ensued after the description of safe places was how easy they were taken away or taken over. This suggested the interpretation that in a predominantly white university, safe space for people of color is not guaranteed.

The common answers when asked about places of belonging were everyday routine spaces like offices or classrooms. The first alumni that was interviewed recalled the LEED Alliance office in the School of Education building, identifying it as a hub for people of color in the program. This was a “homely” place that displayed radical educational posters, decolonizing literature, and indigenous art and trinkets. He described it as an authentic and safe space where students could go take a nap at any point in the day. The aspect that stood out to him as a student was how small that allocated area was. He alluded to the divestment in spaces given to underrepresented groups, and how yet despite the small area, the office was a successful safe place. The office was depicted as a threshold that white students rarely crossed, and when they did, for a moment it seemed as though they were the ones who did not belong. On a similar note, another alumni that was interviewed described the office they shared with their PhD colleagues during her Ethnic Studies graduate program. The interviewee described the space to be colorful, “homely”, and vibrant with the cultures of everyone residing there. A key part of the conversation was when she emphasized the meaning of a safe place when describing instances of leaving that office and-

experiencing microaggressions even within the same building. A specific story she recalled was a time she walked into a shared kitchen area, and the young white man standing there told her that the kitchen was only for people with an office in the building. She seemed incredulous at the idea that leaving the doorway of the Ethnic Studies office and walking down a hall, her safe space did not follow. And as she continued to depict the contrast of West African fabrics with Mexican Indigenous patterns that were displayed in office space, a different type of contrast was raised, in this case the distinction between safe spaces for people of color and the rest of the university campus. Throughout the discussion of “homely” places, the comment from another student about the lack of cultural representation in sterile spaces lingered. This was a point of reflection in the study; the places of belonging people of color described were small and unrecognized thresholds. One of the interviewees stated, “The university designates spaces for people of color and says “you can occupy this area but the rest is for the white students”.”

One student distinctly talked about the resentment of having to go out of their way to find a place to belong because it seemed at a glance that white students did not have to. “It did not come naturally to me, and it was frustrating.”, he expressed. This student’s perspective on safe space contrasted the private office nooks that were described earlier. They found their comfort in large crowded hubs like the Center for Community dining hall and the University Memorial Center. Where he described interactions are very rare due to the level of activity going on in those places. To him, safe space was depicted as invisibility. The student mentioned a similar instance when it came to discussing lecture halls; always choosing to sit in the back to avoid being seen or being forced to interact among the

sea of other students. This thought arose in a different interview with a current student. She articulated the same comfort in large places where no one paid attention to her because she could get lost among the crowd. An important thing to note in these accounts is that both students, although expressing preference for large places, also described the need to sit near exit points. Whether it was sitting in the back of the room or picking an aisle seat, they did not seem to feel completely at ease in those spaces.

“I have the right to exist here”

The interviews conducted for this study painted a narrative, I witnessed not only a change of perceptions but a change of mindset. “I know this campus was not made for me.”, affirmed a recent alumni. Variations of that phrase were spoken across multiple interviews. More than one student of color described their existence on the campus as surveilled and hostile. While their white counterparts shared a completely different sentiment: “Yes, I think I belong here, I think there is a place for everyone.” I was clear that the reality presented differently for students of color in their memories and perceptions of the campus space. Conversations with students of color began with reminiscing about their excitement to attend the university, later tuned to unpleasant experiences they experienced in the same campus spaces. But across a number of interviews there was a shift in the conclusion of the narrative: it was where students described their decision to start taking up space. The intimidation of being the only person of color in the room, or the white walls of a sterile space closing turned into incentives to exist in the spaces they paid a hefty tuition fee for.

Entitlement or conformity was what these students had to adopt in order to survive their time at CU. What stood out to me here was the apparent mirroring of their white counterparts, it seemed like there were two options: they had to conform and adjust their attitude to pursue an education or they had to leave.

A change in attitude often came in the form of sitting at the very front of the classroom instead of hiding in the back, or confidently walking into the library to use a table to study instead of going back to their house. I was intrigued by the evolution that these interviews depicted, at the same time I realized how upsetting the thought of having to conform to a space to pursue an education. A current student illustrated the changes he had to make to his persona in order to get through this university. At first this student was reluctant to share, but as the conversation flowed he began to tell stories that displayed resentment. To him it was evident that the university spaces were not made for him, he felt alienated not only by the unwelcoming environments he perceived but by lack of diversity. He talked about the antisocial nature he began to adopt and the strain on his academics, and how that led him to try to adapt to his environment. It was evident that he went out of his way to find places of belonging and to assert his right to take up space on this campus. A different interviewee shared how he went from skipping class because he did not want to walk in late and face the stares, to “taking a front row seat to his education”, and choosing to sit at the very front of lectures. A different alumni who attended the university almost a decade ago, still clearly recalled the intimidation of taking up space in a lecture hall, table, or even a sidewalk. He recalled walking along a four foot wide sidewalk and still somehow feeling pushed to the side by

often white individuals who had no trouble taking up the space. Rage and frustration were pent up feelings that eventually came out as confrontation and the self-proclaimed right to take up space. “I deserve to exist here”, was the powerful thought he shared. He also described the empowerment he felt when he began to take the front row seat in classrooms.

The idea of adopting entitlement to survive laid heavily on my mind during the rest of the interviews, but a different type of attitude change presented itself in an interview with a female student. She did not talk about confrontation or rage, she did not mention asserting herself in the space she inhabits. She instead talked about acceptance. The acceptance of her place in this university and the reality of not belonging here. This student talked about the discomfort in spaces around the campus she still feels after years of attending, and how the way she deals is often by keeping to herself. Picking out single person tables and cubicles in the library, or sitting in the aisle seats of lectures were the forms of adaptation she described. Her recount depicted that the feeling of being watched and judged persists to this day and that at this point she has accepted that is the way things are.

This theme showed that students of color have the options to make a change to survive at the university, accept their place, or otherwise leave. On the other hand, it alludes that white students are not faced with the same decisions. This phenomena can support the idea of the Psychological Wage that Du Bois writes about.¹ In this situation, whiteness is a currency that buys the right to exist on the university campus without needing to change or needing to tolerate racism.

¹ Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1935.

Other Forms of Racism at CU

While there were four main themes that arose in the data of this study, there were other insights that although not as common across the interviews were still powerful stories. Ultimately, these recounts were not miscellaneous because they still illustrated the racial disparity explained in the other themes. Throughout the study there were multiple spaces that were mentioned as places of discomfort. The CASE building was talked about in relation to the theme of sterility, but other places like the Recreation Center, Koelbel Business, the University Memorial Center (UMC), and the Engineering Center. The relation these spaces have is the large square footage and crowded use. Students described the Rec Center as a place where they felt observed and judged by hostile occupants like white men. I heard this thought more than once and it was not surprising. However what was surprising was when an alumni mentioned the UMC as an uncomfortable place. The UMC was usually talked about in a positive light, because it hosts offices and meeting spaces for student groups. I realized that was the same reason why the participant had a poor association with the space; “The UMC was where the little white supremacists would camp out and table their club”. He was talking about the student group Turning Point USA that constantly tabled in the lobby. He shared that his association with the group was that it promoted White Supremacist ideals. To him, the UMC created space for racism and bigotry, and the university

tolerated it. This point complemented his other statement where he nonchalantly said “Oh I know this campus was not made for me.” There existed a duality of seeing the university allow space for racist ideals but at the same time seeing there was little to space for him as a person of color. This alumni was the only one to mention that detail so it was not a recurring theme. Regardless, it was an impacting moment in the interview process and it reinforced the notion that the university spaces do not foster belonging for people of color.

The intention of these methods was to allow the participants to paint a picture of their stories, and the findings displayed just that. From the beginning, each interview described the anticipation of attending the university and the love at first sight they felt with the campus. As the storyline progressed it was evident that to some students, the facade of the institution was challenged by their experiences. What followed next was seeking refuge in community hubs around campus or the realization that there are not many safe spaces. The conclusion of the storyline led us to see the student’s acceptance of their roles at this university. Students both white and people of color revealed the disparities on the spaces of this campus. From a knowledge that the space was not built for people of color, to the present realities that it still may not be; the participants unveiled true and emotional recounts that were recorded successfully through this methodology.

5. Discussion

The stories that students and alumni shared with me were in some ways not out of the ordinary. Given my own lived experiences at this university, I sympathized with recounts of fear or discomfort. In other ways I was surprised by the answers students shared. In a previous section I described the isolation that often comes with being a person of color in a predominantly white institution, and the consequent insecurity of speaking out about racism. Because of this reality, I was unsure about the types of responses I would receive. When I heard responses from students of color describing instances that related to my own I was surprised and validated at the same time. In fact the connection I had with said participants often put them at ease to be able to share their stories. These interviews were a learning experience and they provided tremendous insight that I constantly connected to the literature review. I came across multiple points of deep reflection throughout the conversations I had where something that a participant said directly added to a term or idea that I read about. Through the themes of homogeneity, sterile space, safe space, and acceptance there were these points of reflection that I will outline in this section.

A Glance into the White Space

The narratives of this study reflected and contributed to the literature that was reviewed in this study. It was clear to refer back to Moore's piece on the White Space as these students described the way they had to navigate space and their conscious level on the food chain at the university. The value of recruiting both white and students of color was the variety of insights I anticipated to obtain. For the most part the types of things that students of color talked about were not shocking, however, the insight into some of the white students' perspectives provided food for thought. The theme of sterile space arose on its own in the first few interviews prompting me to include it in the rest of the conversations. In the very first interview that was conducted the participant illustrated his distaste for sterile space and the metaphorical spotlight that seemed to follow him around in places like that. In the following interview I spoke to a white student where he shared his attraction to sterile space because it felt like it was unclaimed.

Another white student I interviewed a few days later described the same affinity, saying that sterile spaces provided the opportunity to leave their mark behind. From the perspectives of the people of color that were interviewed and even my own positionality, statements like these were almost startling to hear. The duality of having one student describe their effort to not have a presence in spaces like these to then hearing another talk about their opposite intention echoed the writings of both Moore and Anderson on the White Space.

In her discussion Moore referred to the Central Park incident of 2020 where white woman Amy Cooper was approached by an African American man who reminded her of the pet leashing policy at the park. She responded aggressively by calling the police and iterating that she was a white woman being harassed by a black man. Moore discussed the implicit claim Amy knew she had over the area thus prompting her to assert her dominance and assume the police would be on her side. In this example, the woman had complete confidence in her right to use the space the way she deemed fit, with no consequence whatsoever.¹ Although this is an extreme example and none of the interviews in this study displayed that type of aggression, the same theme is clearly displayed. Claim, dominion, entitlement, to a place is often ingrained in the minds of white individuals.

Unawareness

This touches on the observations I made when interviewing the two white students who shared their comfort in untouched spaces. There was no shift in their tone, no uncomfortable looks. While I had to hide my surprise, their countenance displayed the same as if they were describing what color shoes they were wearing.

This point leads directly to a statement George Lipsitz made in his book *How Racism Takes Place*, where he described the food pyramid of race and how white individuals all participate in systems that elevate their status in a space: whether they know it or not they reap the benefits of their social hierarchy regardless of their intention. Lipsitz continues on to describe the White Spatial Imaginary in which white individuals thrive, his depiction particularly resembles the aspects of the sterile space that students of color resented in their stories.

The white spatial imaginary idealizes “pure” and homogeneous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior. It seeks to hide social problems rather than solve them. . . This imaginary does not emerge simply or directly from the embodied identities of people who are white. It is inscribed in the physical contours or the places where we live, work and play and it is bolstered by financial rewards for whiteness

Pure and homogeneous. The tenor of those words still reflect an uncomfortable tone that students spoke during their interviews. But does that tone sound the same to all? The interviews that revealed an attraction to unclaimed sterile space did not reflect discomfort but rather the opposite. When one of the students talked about the implicit invitation to leave your mark and break the space in. There was an emphasis on the implicit part, because most students of color did not describe that same feeling.

Clean Versus Racist

A viewpoint that challenged the narrative of sterility being hostile to people of color was the couple of participants who shared they did not mind sterile places like the CASE Building.

¹ Embrick, David G., and Wendy Leo Moore. 2020. “White Space(s) and the Reproduction of White Supremacy.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 64 (14): 1935–45

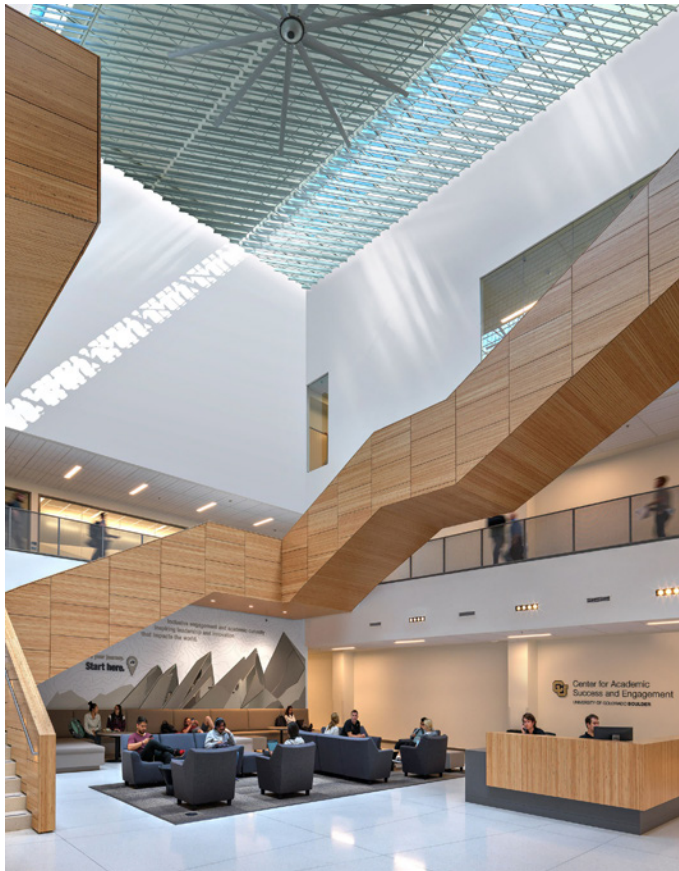


Figure 5. Center for Academic Success and Engagement

A current student described the comfort that clean spaces give her and the positive effect it has on her productivity. Another participant talked specifically about the CASE Building and how it was a good place to get work done because of the quiet environment. This painted a picture that perhaps sterile space is not a conduit of white supremacy and that it may simply be personal preference. However, a very important detail here was the way these students described their preference and their reasoning for it. The student who expressed the productivity that clean spaces inspire in her also brought up the thought that spaces like the CASE building that were known for being sterile spaces needed color and cultural representation. She described it as a good place for focusing but she understood why the bleakness of the space could create discomfort. This part of the interview provoked some

meaningful reflection. It identified the thought that clean and efficient spaces do not have to be cold and exclusionary to people of color in order to foster productivity. A space can be modernly designed, clean, and quiet and yet display images and color that represent diversity. It can have large open areas to invite any and all who wish to enter without provoking a fear of being seen. Efficiency and cleanliness should not necessarily have to reflect homogeneity and purity like Lipsitz described the White Imaginary. Conditions like these have the potential to alienate certain groups of people, even if efficiency and focus are the justification for the design.

Academia as a White Space

This study identified themes and types of spaces that showed hostility towards students of color, and demonstrated evident racialization of space according to the participants' shared stories. While physical aspects and locations were discussed, based on the findings of this study, I argue that there is also an intangible space to be discussed. Wendy Leo Moore touches on the existence of ideological space and how it is not exempt from becoming a White Space. When I first read that, I had trouble grasping the meaning of ideological space and its connection to the White Space. It was clear to attribute the idea to physical, geographical locations but applying to abstract space was not as simple. At the end of this study I not only understood what that space meant, but I drew the connection to my own findings. The university is a physical location of education and leisure consisting of building facades and landscape, but an abstraction of it is Academia itself and the idea of higher education.

It has been mentioned throughout this study that higher education has traditionally been a gatekept place, not in a literal form but this begins to describe how educational institutions are a part of this greater concept of access to knowledge. I refer to space as a physical area a student can inhabit, whereas I refer to atmosphere as an ideological surrounding that includes the notions of racism, societal norms, and politics. Students exist in and navigate the university spaces in their day to day lives, and they can find safe spaces or avoid the ones that appear hostile, but they are constantly surrounded by the atmosphere of academia. No matter what office they walk in or what isolated cubicle in the library they sit at. This atmosphere is white, exclusive, racist, and elitist, because those are the characteristics of the White Supremacist society we live in.

If someone had asked me one year ago if I believed that architecture could be racist, I would unequivocally have said yes. I would have vocalized how minimalism as an elimination of cultural color was racist, or how colonial styles demonstrated oppression. If I was asked the same question today, I would still articulate those things, but I would add on the fact that racist architecture cannot exist without a racist perpetrator. I argue that these elements do not stand on their own, and instead are a product of a centuries-old racialized society that perpetuates White Supremacy. In this sense we cannot talk about the physical space when the atmosphere that space is in dictates the racialization. This reflection was provoked when a white alumni (who was not being interviewed) inquired about my study. This individual asked about the topic and when I replied he responded with a look of amusement, asking exactly what places on campus were racist. Being at an early point in the study, as well as the nature of the question he asked, I did not have specific answers. But when I mentioned

the idea of sterile space he interrupted and asked if it was actually the space or if it was the people. That interaction, although not explicit data collection, gave me an insight into the perceptions of that individual and prompted the realization that racialized space is a product of the racialized atmosphere.

So, while there are technical design aspects that could be changed to better accommodate people of color in educational spaces, the true change is based on policy, values, and push-back against that White Supremacy. This brings us full circle, in the introduction, I described the departments at CU Boulder that exist to support diversity and provide aid in discriminating incidents. Then later in the section about CU's background I included an example of a student's recount of being called racial slurs by their roommates, and OIEC taking little action. The distress that situation caused the student may have painted the campus as a racialized space of discomfort, and the design of the campus could have been disregarded as a whole. Indicating that a significant piece of creating safe spaces for all students at the university is implementing true and effective support and inclusion. When an institution like CU Boulder highlights departments like OIEC or ODECE that aim to foster belonging and support, without actually supporting the students, this hints at who the space was meant for, and when we analyze the patterns of recruitment and retention, we do not need a hint.

Who is this campus really made for?

The idea of efficiency or "one size fits all" approach is something that I want to dive deeper into. In the section where I summarized background information about CU Boulder's campus I also referred to the 2018-

New York Times article that pointed out the tendency of the university to recruit in white affluent neighborhoods. That article weighed heavily throughout this study because of the evident demographic that represents the university. During one interview a student talked about the term “one-percenter”, meaning students who are in the one-percent wealth level—a hyperbolic statement that does not apply to all but generally describes the income level of recruited students. He articulated how this university is full of rich, “one-percenter” students and how that was most likely the reason people of color feel so left out in the campus spaces. The point this student made reminded me of a different interview where the student delineated that before she started attending the university she saw herself using the spaces and belonging on campus, and once she began school it was “a different story”. The student articulated that she saw people of color on CU interest flyers and internet posts but she did not feel represented in actuality, therefore she found difficulty in taking up space around campus feeling scrutinized as one of the few people of color in the room. Stories that came directly from students confirmed that the targeted recruitment of the university is in fact noticed by students of color who tend to be in-state tuition payers. This led me to question how the target occupant of this university informed design aspects of the campus. When talking about the CASE Building on main campus, an alumni pointed out that university campus tours usually start there, because its a central location and because it is a relatively new building, but also because it is bound to give an impression. That impression may depend on the audience, thinking back to the level of discomfort of multiple students of color illustrated in sterile spaces, what kind of tone does that starting point of a tour set? The White Space as a conduit of the ingrained White Supremacy in our systems could indicate

that this is all intentional. “One size fits all” design that is present in sterile spaces that lack color and cultural representation and that foster discomfort in people of color may be intentional. Or it may be that it is an unforeseen product of the White Supremacy that is ingrained into every aspect of our social system.

Concluding Words: Going Forward

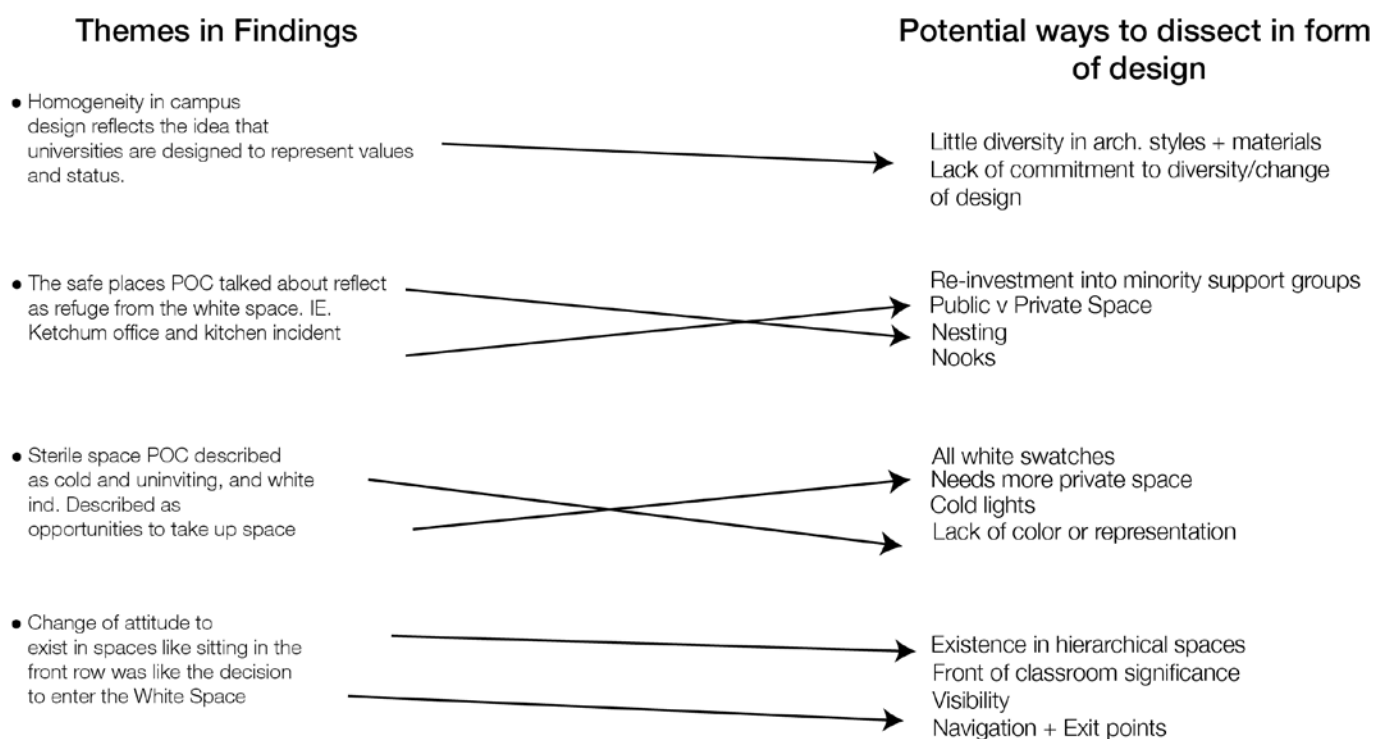
The findings of this study reveal the elements of the campus design of the University of Colorado Boulder that contribute to disparities in racial experience. These elements ranged from the lack of diversity in architectural style, sterile space, lack of safe spaces, and the underlying factor that the university continues to be marketed towards white affluent students. The interviews that were conducted voiced true stories of discomfort or comfort in the university spaces and revealed differences in experience for people of color and white individuals. Students of color depicted a campus where they were forced to find nooks and safe spaces or change their attitude in order to pursue their education. They also brought light to the elements that made them feel small or made them feel out of place on this campus and how the initial illusion of the beautiful landscapes of this campus turned sour once they settled into a routine. On the other hand, the interviews with white students showed that their initial positive perception of the campus did not change significantly or in a negative way. The entitlement to exist in a space or lack thereof that the participants displayed shed light on the differences I mentioned and the disparities that the built environment highlighted.

The figure below (Figure 6) shows a preliminary info graphic that breaks down the connection between the themes found in this study and the possible ways they connect to design. The graphic displays the themes of homogeneity, safe space, sterility, and change of attitude on the left and points to the right where design applications are listed. For example, the safe places described by people of color hint at an analysis of private versus public spaces in a building, and they highlight the need for reinvestment into POC and minority support spaces. This infographic is only a beginning framework, but it is something that could be further developed and applied to future campus design.

In addition to the data collected, this conclusion is supported by the literature that was analyzed for this study. The idea of the White Space discussed by Wendy Leo Moore and Elijah Anderson provided a lens into the intertwine of institutional racism and physical space. It shed light on the claim that white individuals

lay on the spaces they inhabit, in doing so, marking their place at the top. Moore claims this to be a conduit of the White Supremacy that is ever present in our society, implying that these attitudes may be inherent. Excluding the data collection process of this study for a moment, another type of valuable insight I gained was from simply sharing the topic of this paper with peers and professors. The types of reactions I received were remarkable in their nature, from uncomfortable avoidance to utter contempt. These reactions only supported the validity of the literature. The white individuals that challenged this study with diminishing questions allowed me to witness first-hand the ideas of privilege and imposed dominion that Moore, Anderson, and Lipsitz discussed in their writing.

Based on the main themes that arose in the data, some practical design solutions were identified.



The idea of sterility and the discomfort around the bleakness and cold nature appeared to be a simple one to address according to the participants themselves. The fine line between clean and exclusionary place is something that the campus will need to identify. When designing a modern place that is meant for the use of all, including aspects that reflect diversity like color, cultural displays, art, is a simple approach that could shift the narrative of a cold place to a warm and inviting one. In *Chromophobia*, Batchelor talks about the idea of minimalism and how it seems to be a phenomena that we as a society have arrived at.¹ Meaning we began from a colorful ornate point and “progressed” to a minimal approach to design. If educational institutions could travel back to a point before minimalism, where color and culture can be displayed, the design of these spaces could begin to be more inclusive. At the same time we must acknowledge that physical design cannot be the only approach to the improvement of educational spaces.

¹ Batchelor, David. *Chromophobia*. London, England: Reaktion, 2013.

This study concludes that through curated homogeneity, sterility, and lack of cultural hubs the design of this campus contributes to racialized experiences. However, the design elements are not the sole culprit. The literature and conducted interviews suggest that any sort of design element or space does not and cannot exist on its own. The hierarchies created within the designed environment are but an accessory to the prevalence of White Supremacy in higher academia. The racialized space cannot exist without the perpetrator, and the perpetrator cannot claim dominion without a space to do so in. While there are elements of design that can contribute to a disparity in racialized experience, the problem is systemic. Failure to recognize this will lead any design of campus to continue to perpetrate oppressive places to people of color and force them to conform as an added price for their education.

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