Improving Mental Wellbeing on College Campuses Through Participatory Art Installation

by

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the mental wellbeing of the students and faculty here at MIT has generated a lot of discussion, both on campus and in the press. In response to this, a large number of student-lead and institute-lead mental health initiatives have been launched, promoting conversation and acceptance, and providing a wide range of social and medical resources. However, can we further supplement our community’s mental wellbeing through altering our physical surroundings?

This thesis draws on precedent research and case studies in the fields of psychology, biology, and art, and combines it with site-specific observational studies of student life on campus. The culmination is the proposal and implementation of a public art installation that uses properties of soil, nature, and customizable components that users can interact with. This installation aims to improve the mental wellbeing of the community at MIT and/or anyone who comes into contact with the art objects through different modes of active interaction and passive interaction. The thesis concludes with an examination of the installation and a discussion of the feedback gained from users as well as observed behaviors exhibited in relation to the objects.
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University is a period in one's life that is filled with a considerable amount of activity. Here at MIT, students are constantly on the go: attending lectures, working on problem sets and projects, conducting research, participating in extracurriculars, etc. But even if we enjoy each of these activities on their own, the culmination of them ultimately makes us feel like we are living in a pressure cooker. The topic of mental health is not new to our campus, but it has gained significant focus in recent years due to the high number of student and faculty suicides, as well as an increasing use of mental health resources. Thankfully, in addition to counseling services we also have a number of different initiatives dedicated to promoting mental wellbeing such as Save TFP, Active Minds, Happy Club and MIT Community Wellness. These groups hold events to relieve stress, bring together the community, educate students about mental health, and promote conversation on the topic in order to fight the stigma surrounding mental health issues. These are all invaluable resources, and they function as great active mental health agents.

However, our campus lacks passive mental health agents. Some studies show that emotional wellbeing, productivity, and general mood are affected by our visual surroundings. The spaces that we inhabit on a day-to-day basis subconsciously have an effect on the tasks we carry out in those spaces and the emotions and thoughts we form. Students often talk about how dark, drab, and discouraging some of the spaces feel on campus, but there has been a lack of initiatives dedicated to altering or supplementing the physical appearance of MIT's campus. Although it is difficult (and
extremely expensive) to alter architecture on campus, it is very easy to introduce appealing visual objects into these spaces. By enhancing the students' experiences of their surroundings, their mental wellbeing will also be positively impacted. These appealing visual objects can come in the form of installation art.

In the following pages, this thesis will study the different types of interactions the MIT community has with fellow peers and the spaces that they inhabit in an attempt to understand what nourishes mental wellbeing. Drawing methods from precedent research in the fields of phycology, biology, and architecture, and combining it with precedent projects/installations as well as site-specific research (MIT's campus and student body), this thesis will propose a synthesis in the form of a participatory public art installation. In the final sections, this thesis will include documentation of the research, planning, and design decisions leading up to the creation of the installation. Following the installation, there will be an analysis and discussion of feedback gained and observed behavior.
TWO | WELLBEING AT MIT

Many consider MIT an intense academic environment, an environment that has notoriously fostered poor mental health for years and unfortunately drives significant numbers of students and faculty to go as far as take their own lives. In a recent viral article published in the Boston Globe, the community was faced with the chilling statistics that over the past decade, MIT’s suicide rate has well surpassed the national average for college campus suicide rates, and in fact almost reached twice that number. The national average for college campuses is estimated to be between 6.5 and 7.5 suicides per 100,000 students. On our campus, that number is 12.5 (Rocheleau). In the 2014-2015 school year alone, two undergraduates and two graduate students took their lives, two within the first month of fall classes.

The numbers of students utilizing mental health resources on campus increased significantly during this time, and MIT was forced to step back and reassess the ways in which they were dealing with mental health. In April and May 2015, a survey was administered to all 10,831 MIT undergraduate and graduate students regarding several mental health topics. Seventeen other campuses administered the same national survey. Several notable findings included that although a majority of the MIT respondents were satisfied with most aspects of MIT’s Medical Mental Health and Counseling Service, 26 percent of undergraduates and 13 percent of graduate students were extremely dissatisfied, citing the inability to schedule appointments without long delays. Furthermore, although many respondents said that they knew where to find professional help, many cited reasons such as “I question how serious
my needs are" and "I prefer to deal with issues on my own" as for why they do not reach out for help. Additionally 46 percent of MIT undergraduate respondents cited a lack of time due to their busy schedules as a barrier that prevented them from seeking help. The percentage of students responding in these ways were found to be 10-20 percent more than those at a peer institution. Finally, compared to the national sample, more MIT respondents felt that the campus climate encourages open discussion of mental and emotional health, but significantly more students at MIT than elsewhere agreed with the statement, "At my school, I feel that the academic environment has a negative impact on students’ mental and emotional wellbeing." For many, this can be tied to what is known as "Impostor Syndrome" which refers to high-achieving individuals who are unable to internalize their accomplishments and thus have a persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud". Unfortunately this phenomenon is extremely common in education, especially in programs with competitive admission and high achievers (Peterson).

In response to these findings as well as to the tumultuous mental climate on campus, MIT has responded by creating the MindHandHeart Initiative, a committee created of students, faculty, and student health and wellness experts to spearhead different mental health campaigns and make proposals such as the "Tell Me About Your Day" Project financially possible. In addition, the Institute has bolstered other existing mental health resources. Our campus also has a large number of student-led groups that aim to promote positive mental wellbeing (Active Minds, Save TFP, Happy Club, Peer Ears etc), as well a start-up created in the past year centered on principles
of peer-to-peer counseling and human-connection (Lean on Me), and a new event called "MIT I Messed Up" that celebrates stories of failure at MIT and aims to dispel Imposter Syndrome by showing that even people who we think are successful and superior also struggle through the same things and have the same failures as us.

However, even though our campus is investing a lot of time and energy into organizing these wonderful resources, which for the sake of this thesis will be referred to as "active mental health agents", they have neglected to consider "passive mental health agents" which can be defined as our surroundings, the spaces we inhabit, and the objects that we come into contact with. Our institute’s architecture consists of a lot of concrete, stone tiles, and not a lot of windows. It is considered by students, faculty, and visitors alike as “industrial” in feeling, especially the MIT student center, a giant concrete building with poor circulation, poor lighting, and stuffy-feeling spaces. In fact, the 5th floor, a space dedicated completely to student study-space is almost completely windowless. And unfortunately due to the poor weather of New England, we are forced to spend much of our time inside doing work. On a few recent trips to other college campuses in the area, I was struck by how different their student center buildings were. They were also more open, had more organic materials, and utilized natural lighting more effectively.
Image 1: Stratton Student Center at MIT
Source: http://mit69.casahedron.com/gallery/d/598-1/20040605_4997.jpg

Image 2: Lulu Chow Wang Campus Center at Wellesley College
Source: https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/93/c7/dd/93c7dd86a158eae262e2edb90721c4f6.jpg
Tiandra Ray, a former undergraduate here at MIT, conducted a campus-wide survey in 2015 that managed to collect over 250 undergraduate responses from almost every department and from a variety of living groups both on and off campus. Some trends that she discovered were that in terms of work spaces, students preferred spaces that were semi-private and could allow them to have privacy while still having others around. On the other hand, for finding peace, students preferred spaces that were quiet and had access to nature or a view of Boston/Cambridge. They sought places that were comfortable or felt like home. Other trends included general dislike for the design of the student center, and a preference for nature, particularly the color green as well as the want for more natural and organic materials.
Among the things that students would want to change were the following quotes
“More plants and nature based design”, "We need more wood, wood is the new
concrete dontcha know", and “Use more organic colors and materials. More natural
light.”

Although incorporating large-scale changes to architecture is expensive and
difficult, it is easy to introduce appealing objects into existing spaces. The following
section will discuss precedent research in the fields of psychology, biology, and art,
and combine it with the response from Ray’s survey to propose an on-campus
installation.
What is Mental Wellbeing?

First for the purposes of this thesis, it is necessary to define what “positive mental wellbeing” is. “Positive mental [wellbeing] means more robust, broader, and more productive living... It may be seen that the seriousness of positive mental health is measurable by the extent to which one’s capacities are used. It shows up in greater productivity, richer living, increased satisfaction, and better human relations.” Mental health is not only the prevention of psychiatric disorder, but also the promotion of a positive state of wellbeing and productive living (White). The social psychologist, W.I. Thomas attempted to outline basic psychological needs of an individual by identifying four main wishes: The wish for new experience, the wish for security, the wish for recognition, and the wish for response. In White’s thesis, he takes these four main needs and looks at them from an architectural lens. However, this thesis will apply these principles in regards to an interactive public art installation. The need for creativity, spontaneity, and volition (the wish for new experience) can be seen as an installation that allows for individuals to contribute, create, and express; a small break from everyday routine. The wish for security can be interpreted as a sense of safety and comfort. This can be assumed to assist psychological stability. The wish for recognition can apply to how an adolescent craves acceptance by a peer group and way in which the physical environment may influence the process. How can interactions forged through an art installation make a person feel acceptance? Lastly the wish for response can be seen as the need for conversation or an exchange with
other humans. This installation will aim to create an environment of sharing and communication with fellow students.

**Designing for Mental Health**

As we progressed from the 1600s into the current century, there has been a dramatic shift in how much attention we paid towards designing for mental health. From an architectural point-of-view, building planners and interior designers must take care to not aggravate or contribute to the high-stress and vulnerable state of students. Many studies note the benefit of providing spaces that are home-like, utilizing colored walls, art, and plants. It’s easy to make large institutions feel impersonal in general, but by making lounge spaces more personable, students will feel more comfortable (Ray).

“Better health results from a state of mind which has a fortified sense of coherence” translates to providing spaces that do not steer too far away from reality. Rooms that are colorful can be comfortable, but ones that are extremely loud in color/pattern and are haphazardly laid out can stress out users of the space. Spaces that feel too clean can make a person feel unwelcome, isolated, or trapped. Although many studies have found trends such as these, the general consensus is that perception and preference still varies depending on the inhabitant (Ray).

How people view the work also differs depending on different perspectives. Not only will a person unconsciously project their personal past and experiences onto new interactions, but also the setting in which they see it (environment, time, lighting, temperature, mood, etc.) can have a profound effect on their interpretation, reception,
and conclusions about the piece. “I have realized how difficult my proposition of public art is; how it is not a formulation in the studio or in the mind, but also involves the kind of arteries which surround and utilize it” (Shamash). The lesson to be learned is not only to keep in mind all of these environmental factors as well as research into the intended audience, but that sometimes there can be many unforeseen effects that cannot be accounted for ahead of time purely by theory and research. Getting out of the studio or laboratory and conducting social experiments can result in different data that can greatly inform design decisions (Shamash).

It is also helpful to keep in mind that if something is designed with too much specific intention, it results in only one dominant way of use (or only one way of interaction.) When an individual finds this type of interaction unsatisfactory, is it extremely hard for them to adjust due to the lack of alternatives. However, on the other hand, if a building (or in the case of this thesis, installation) does not have enough structure and is too ambiguous in its intent, it might also be very troublesome to an individual (White).

**Nature and Mental Wellbeing**

As touched on briefly above, nature is often associated with mental wellbeing and plays a vital role in creating nourishing environments for inhabitants. Researchers recommend having a view of the natural landscape or having access to some sort of nature to promote mental and emotional health. Studies on the effect of nature exposure on cognitive performance and health have been performed, and one study
Conducted by the Center for Health Systems and Designs at Texas A&M University found that exposure to nature lead to shorter hospital stays on average. In a study for the U.S Forest Service, nature correlated positively with recovery from mental fatigue, restoration of attention and psychological health, and the ability to process information. Interestingly enough, a study conducted in 2008 by Marc Berman revealed results that showed that regardless of whether the subject enjoys the outdoors or other outside factors such as temperature, results to nature exposure remain the same (Ray).

Interestingly, gardening has always been associated with mental healing, and many gardeners report that spending time digging in the dirt is extremely therapeutic and imbues them with feelings of happiness. For years people have suggested countless explanations for why this is the case, citing themes of nurture, meditation, interaction, and “connection with life on a fundamental level” as reasons. However in recent years, there has surfaced scientific evidence as to why this phenomenon occurs. It has been found that a strain of bacterium in soil called Mycobacterium vaccae triggers serotonin release in the brain when it is injected into the body. Serotonin in turn elevates mood and decreases anxiety. A lack of serotonin is linked to mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety disorders, among others. Recent studies by Dorothy Matthews and Susan Jenks at the Sage Colleges in Troy, NY tested whether this bacterium is effective on mice when it is ingested instead of injected. Their findings concluded that those with the ingested bacterium still consistently performed better and with significantly less anxiety. This points to the exciting possibility that this bacterium could have similarly successful effects on
humans through simple things like coming into contact with soil or even just breathing in the microbes (Sachs). How can these properties of soil and nature be incorporated into an art installation piece?

What is Public Art?

In her paper regarding public art, Diane Shamash argues that a vast majority of current public art functions to “glorify state ideals, official events, or the artist personalities who produce the work.” In this way, these monuments and objects function purely as illustrative and decorative, stopping short of involving individuals with their environment. Only recently, with emergence of publicly funded arts organizations, culturally diverse voices are starting to get heard, focusing on local and immediate communities, rather than engaging with the universal. These artists are not looking to create work to function in the avant-garde, but rather want to show the aesthetic of daily life. This art should no longer be frozen in time, but should evolve as does its contributors. “The public is not a mass, the public is an individual” (Shamash).

In works of public art such as statues commemorating certain individuals or events, the public is told what culture is and what form it takes. In this way, the mass of people is asked to identify and conform to the sculptural monument instead of continuing with their own reality/perception. A second type of public art is commissioned work, done by artists in their studios. To the author, these come off as portable objects, dislocated. They have a superficial connection to the public and lack purpose. There is little attention paid to context when commissioning these works, and
the end result is a glorification of the artist and not engaging for the public.

Art of the 60’s and 70’s rejected Abstract Expressionism and sought to establish art based on the experiential, the contextual, and the dialectical. The setting of the museum and gallery were traded in for the urban, rural and industrial sites. This work was no longer decorative; instead, it was an attempted dialogue between individual and environment. This kind of public work refined the understanding of “public” and “art.” Artists of this time produced sculptural work that deviated from conventional standards and locations, taking into account their surroundings and how their work evolved in their surroundings (for example Smithson chooses abandoned or decaying sites for his work and includes the work’s own degeneration in the work.)

This movement to make public art more meaningful and relatable to the people, coincided with public support for the arts. But, “what is public art and what is public accountability?” In the Shamash’s words, “A public art in my opinion, is an art which is not culturally exclusive, one which certainly does not have any fixed or specific properties. A public art is one that goes beyond its own purposes. Public accountability is not accountability to the state, to the arts council, or to the foundation that administers the funds. It is involvement through a community in every capacity as an artist” (Shamash).
FOUR | CASE STUDIES

The High Line

The High Line is a 1.45-mile-long stretch of abandoned railroad across New York City that has been converted into a public park. It has clean wooden detailing and is filled with an abundant amount of different species of plants.

When I climbed the stairs and stepped onto the park, it felt like an immediate escape from the hustle and bustle of the city below even though the rest of the city was still visible. It does not offer the complete immersion offered by Central Park, but it was nevertheless a rejuvenating, calming, and beautiful space. The space is visited by a huge variety of people: office workers, students, tourists, families, etc, and allows for public and semi-private interactions. The space is flexible and can be used to have conversations with others or relax by oneself and take a mid afternoon nap. While I was there, I passed by numerous joggers and even a group of people doing yoga.

The option of having a relaxing green space in an industrial setting is a really interesting and effective concept. I am further interested in the flexibility of this space and the ways that other people utilize it for their own needs.
Image 4: The High Line in New York City
Cube

The Cube is a compact mobile dwelling space created by Feng Shui firm Spaceflavor for client Lui Ming, a Feng Shui practitioner who wanted a solution that allowed him to clean up his personal space while crowds of students inhabited his house during the day. The Cube is a two story, eight feet high space that provides Lui Ming with a space to rest, meditate, study, and sleep (Chauhan). The Cube is on wheels while allows for easy adjustability regarding relative position to the moon (an important factor for Ming).

I found to the Cube to be engaging in the way it allows for users to have a mobile personal space. Although, similar to the High Line, it is actually quite open, the fact that it is raised above ground level creates an interesting spatial barrier that is conducive to semi-privacy. Additionally, the fact that it is on wheels and can be easily transported to other locations allows for the owner to customize any space they want and mediate in a variety of surroundings.
Image 5: The Cube designed by Spaceflavor
Insertion Module

The Insertion Module by Matthew Mazzotta (2009) is a structure that is specifically designed for parts of architecture that have been left as negative spaces. It is camouflaged within the façade of the building and can be rolled out and unfolded into a Tea House for people to sit around and enjoy.

This module is provocative in the way it raises questions about space, and in the concept of creating a gathering space out of what was originally an empty forgotten space. Furthermore, its mobility gives it a lot of flexibility and customizability. Like the previous two, this also has the ability to create a moment of relaxation and escape, but on a smaller scale. Finally, this piece brings a traditionally indoor space out of the home and into the city, playing with the boundaries between indoor/outdoor space and private/public space.

Image 6: Matthew Mazzotta’s Insertion Module in its different stages
Source: http://matthewmazzotta.com/section/87324_Insertion_Module_Matthew_Mazzotta.html
FIVE | INSTALLATION: GRASS ISLANDS

Design

Taking into account the precedent research, case studies, and context-specific observations and data, my goal was to create an installation piece that could improve mental wellbeing on the MIT campus. First regarding, W.I. Thomas’ theory of human desire, I wanted to create an object that was at once interesting, to appeal to the wish for new experience, but simultaneously familiar and relaxing, to appeal to the wish for security. Furthermore, it was important to me to create a piece that has the ability to bring people together and promote interaction with one another such as in the Insertion Module by Matthew Mazzotta, partially to appeal to the wish for response, but mostly to target the feeling of social disconnect that many people on campus experience. I loved the idea of creating a piece that utilized nature, especially the findings on soil, and aimed to create a piece that functioned as a temporary respite from the busy lives that we lead. Finally, I had to keep in mind that when designing, as White previously stated, I had to make sure not to create a piece that was too narrow or focused in approach so that people do not feel stifled about its interpretation, but not too ambiguous as to cause unease or confusion.

The proposed design plays with concepts from all three case studies: Ease and mobility, semi-privacy through elevated space, and indoor vs. outdoor. It is comprised of 4’x4’ triangular platforms that are covered in a layer of soil and grass. The platforms are on wheels and are of varying heights which allows users to re-arrange and tessellate them in ways that they see fit, and also creates an interesting terrain to
interact with. The size was chosen as dimensions that could comfortably fit one person on one unit, but many multiple people once two or more units are combined.

The decision to include grass was due partially to the want of students to incorporate greenery and nature into their surroundings and partially to provide a way for the soil to be more enticing (students are much more likely to come in contact with the installation if it is covered in "clean" soft grass rather than "dirty" soil.) Furthermore it is more familiar feeling but simultaneously more startling to see it displaced from its original setting.

Below is a rough schematic of the make up of one triangular unit.

Image 7: Rough schematic of one triangular unit
Construction

Construction on these platforms was relatively straightforward with few alterations other than adding in an extra cross-brace to each triangle. Due to factors of time, available space, and financial budget, I settled on creating three triangles for the installation of heights 35”, 28” and 21”. The 7” increments were settled on as a comfortable ledge height similar to the rise of one step in a staircase, and the minimum height of 21” came about as a comfortable height for a standard chair or bench of some sort. Although there was discussion of using a different material such as metal or plastic over the sides of the triangles, I decided to keep them unfinished and uncovered since I found the underlayment to have an organic and clean feel, one that complimented the grass well and was a nice juxtaposition against the cold institute concrete.

A really interesting thing I noticed during the construction phase was that although I was tired and stressed out during the end of the building period, once I started pouring the soil and spreading it out, my mood lifted and I relaxed. Spreading the soil was reminiscent of Zen gardening in a way, and although it was such a simple repetitive task, it was quite enjoyable. It is unsure if soil microbes had anything to do this phenomenon, but I found it interesting, and worth noting down.
Image 7: Building the frame

Image 8: Filling the top with soil
Installation

Once the triangles were completed, the location of installment was the next crucial decision. I decided on two different places. For the first half of the installation period, the triangles were placed in Lobby 10, a place that gets a lot of traffic during the day when students and faculty are going to and from classes. I was interested to see whether people would stop to sit down and interact with the installation even if they were in a place that is usually not a stopping point (unless you are being solicited by one of many student groups that sell tickets and advertise for different events). Furthermore, Lobby 10’s open and bustling atmosphere was a place that I was interested in exploring in relation to the Grass Islands. For the second location, I chose the Stratton Student Center, which is also busy but more sedentary. It is a place that students go to eat, meet with peers, and do work – one that students spend considerable time in. Unlike Lobby 10, the student center has lower ceilings and feels more cramped, but it is also less loud (the noise really bounces off the stone walls in Lobby 10 and echoes everywhere).

In order to receive feedback in a non-soliciting manner, I left a small notebook and a pen for those who wished to write down their thoughts about the installation. I also used direct observation as an additional method of studying the interactions that people had with the Grass Islands (how they arranged them, how they used them, for what duration did they use them, etc.)

To illustrate the behavior that I conjectured would be exhibited, I created a short “teaser” video of sorts strictly for the thesis defense. In the video, several actors
demonstrate how the triangles move and in what way they can be used. Although I would have loved to take hidden camera videos of the triangles being interacted with in a completely natural and unscripted way, actors were used as to not get into legal trouble with filming footage of other students. Below are some film stills from the demonstrational video.

Image 9: Film stills from teaser video
Image 10: Fully assembled triangular units of heights 35", 28", and 21"

Image 11: Close up of triangular units
Community Response

Over the course of two weeks, the installation garnered a lot of positive response from the MIT community as well as from other passerby. There was a great deal of entries left in the feedback book, some which were expected, but others that were pleasantly surprising. Coincidentally, the first week that the installation was up in Lobby 10, there was intense construction going on throughout campus for the sake of Moving Day (a campus-wide event celebrating the 100th anniversary of MIT’s moving from Boston to Cambridge). More specifically, the institute was in the midst of pitching large tents and building stages for performers over every single large patch of grass. Kresge Lawn, Killian Court, Briggs Field, and the field in front of the Green Building were all out of commission and had been for the past two weeks. Furthermore, Cambridge was hit with a week’s worth of rainy and windy weather. Although it was not intentional, these current events definitely had an impact on the reception of my installation.

Although the feedback notebook was a completely open-ended, free form response, there were several trends in what was written. People were excited about the introduction of more greenery into our campus and expressed things like “I needed more green in my life, thanks for putting some in Lobby 10!” and “Thank you for letting me feel closer to nature when the rest of the institute won’t.” It was noted that the grass was very attractive and that the unfinished wood “seemed more organic.” People found great appeal in the ability to re-arrange the triangles, using phrases like “satisfying to tessellate” and “fun to customize” to describe their experiences.
Many commented on the smell, writing things such as "love the smell of dirt" and "smells like wonderful nature even though I'm inside." Several people even wrote that sitting on the islands reminded them of being home again. A large number of responses referenced the unfortunate New England weather that was especially poor that week and also requested that the triangles be mass-produced and installed permanently, especially during the harsh winter months.

I was pleased to read that many people mentioned feelings of happiness, relaxation, and enjoyment. One claimed that laying down on it for several minutes after staying up to do a problem set was exactly what he or she needed to de-stress. Among other interesting entries in the book were multiple poems about nature, quotes from the bible regarding grass and life, and a collection of supportive comments from out-of-country visitors. One of the more amusing pages was full of entries by the MIT Juggling Club urging me to go check their Facebook page for interesting photos of them performing different juggling routines on top of the triangles.

There were few critical comments, but among them were requests for larger shapes, fluffier grass, and taller soil to mask the hard edges of the triangle. A handful of responses requested that the triangles be moved to somewhere a little more quiet and private than Lobby 10, as they much preferred to "relax without everyone taking pictures of [them]." Several also wrote about how comfortable the experience was during the night when no one else was around. One commented sadly, "Unfortunate that we live in a culture where so many people are excited about something that should be normal to be around. Smh MIT."
Image 12: Students relaxing and doing work on the triangles

Image 13: Additional students relaxing on the triangles
Image 14: Student spotted sleeping on the grass

Image 15: Another student taking a mid-day nap
During my time observing the installation, I noticed several interesting behaviors. People were seen using the platforms to hang out with friends, do work, eat food, rest, sleep, and take pictures on. Some of the less predictable activities were sitting on the triangles and hitting the sides rhythmically like a percussive instrument (there is a nice hollow sound when they are struck), practicing violin, meditating, spinning and sliding...
around (which is borderline dangerous and not encouraged), and although I did not
get to see it in person, juggling.

In regards to the two different locations, I noticed that more people stopped by
in Lobby 10 to interact with the triangles, but people on average stayed on the
triangles for longer when it was located in the student center. Other behaviors included
being more likely to approach the triangles when there were fewer people on it or
nearby.
Judging from the generally positive reception and outpour of support by members of the MIT community, this installation has potential as permanent objects, and I believe would integrate nicely into existing spaces on campus given that they can be properly cared for. During the installation, I received offers from several people asking to purchase the triangles for their dorms and social spaces once the installation concluded. It was exciting to see how readily accepting people were to have these green spaces be a part of their everyday lives.

Future iterations and models could explore utilizing different materials, playing with the size, shape, and propagation of units, and introducing them into different spaces (students requested having them for dorms, and faculty entertained the idea of owning one in their office). Further studies would include a more quantitative study into the effect of coming into contact with this installation, through designing and carrying out in-depth psychological studies and surveys.

On a broader scope, I believe that this field of research deserves to be pursued. It is clear from both Ray’s survey results and the feedback book that the living and working spaces we inhabit on a day-to-day basis really do matter and play a role in a student’s mental and emotional wellbeing. In today’s society, designing mentally healthy spaces is gaining more exposure and support and has huge potential for growth and exploration. Especially on college campuses where students are away from home for the first time and must live in a high-stress environment, designing with mental health in mind is crucial. And when retrofitting is not an option for existing
buildings, introducing mentally healthy objects into the space is a cost-effective and non-evasive alternative route that has a lot of opportunity to grow.


Tie, Alan. "Art Therapy: Students Shed Light on Mental Illness Through Art."