

Care in Place at Fowler: Reimagining Access in a University Museum

Care in Place at Fowler reinvents the meaning of a university museum, reconsidering the use and spatial qualities of the Fowler Museum on the UCLA campus. A university museum is a hybrid institution at the intersection of scholarship, cultural and natural history, anthropology and the arts, positioned as a site of research, education, and academic knowledge production.

Transforming the museum into an active space resists the staticity of typical observation-based museums. The university museum as a dynamic and proactive academic space is one way of reimagining it beyond traditional collection-based roles. This project asks how the Fowler Museum can become a third space for students, faculty, and the community? What does a more inclusive and accessible museum space look like that is inviting for a diverse range of individuals? In what ways does participatory design influence spatial design for more accessible spaces?

Currently, the Fowler is underused and unknown to many students, faculty, and the public. It's unclear how to access the museum, what is allowed, and who is allowed. Navigation and accessibility are difficult. This project investigates how the Fowler Museum at UCLA can be reimagined as a third space where people can gather to socialize, co-work, study, and rest. These changes can support improved educational outcomes and mental health.

The research methodology uses qualitative analysis and design exploration. The first phase focuses on engaging students and faculty through surveys and feedback forms to understand habits, barriers, and preferences to use the Fowler Museum. An experience survey was the first step towards understanding the pitfalls of the Fowler and why the museum was experiencing low visitation and interaction. Data analysis from these surveys will inform

strategies for wayfinding and spatial interventions. The second phase sets up a series of pop-up events and workshops to test and speculate new strategies for engagement and accessibility.

Reimagining and redesigning space takes thorough investigation through feedback, precedent research, data collection, space reactivation, and design experimentation. To achieve this, it was crucial to work with students and develop ideas around student needs based on first-hand knowledge. A framework of participatory planning was used to involve the community and ensure diverse voices were heard.

Early feedback from the accessibility survey shows a desire for tactile and multisensory exhibits, audio/digital guides, and staff trained in accessibility. There is a higher desire for rest areas, clear navigation, and quiet spaces. The first pop-up event called *Finding Fowler* was an opportunity for participants to share their experiences on campus, creating a collective cognitive map by marking favorite/least favorite spots and areas where they want more shade, lighting, seating, tables, and social space. The gathering encouraged learning, curiosity, and dialogue about the potential for the Fowler space. The next event is planned for May 13th and will be a space for conversation on specific sustainable seating and accessibility.

This research in disability studies reframes how spatial accessibility can be a collaborative process that uses lived experience, conversation, and feedback to guide design practices rather than standards rooted in institutional frameworks that often only see disability through a medical lens. It explores how participatory planning can be a model for more inclusive community-oriented design which can function at various scales. I hope my capstone project can inform future design decisions at the Fowler and be a precedent for future space activation projects that center accessible design.