



Yesterdays: a history of student life at the U of M

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SUMMARY

“Yesterdays: a history of student life at the U of M” encourages the exploration of the campus of the University of Michigan through a series of artist books that show how the core of most student life traditions have not changed over time. Each book is themed, covering a portion of student life throughout the nearly 200-year history of the University and by merging maps and historical photographs. My project reaches out to a primarily student audience and shows them the vibrant history that the campus contains. Most of its traditions are remarkably similar while others make the campus seem like an entirely different school.

EARLY DIRECTIONS

My initial thesis proposals had very broad themes of concerning the history of Michigan and Ann Arbor, and, looking back, taking that time to explore such wide subject matter allowed me to discover my specific focus. I knew that I was interested in using photography, design, history, and culture in some way. The period of time I spent analyzing Ann Arbor formed the eventual direction of my project, allowing me to pick up pieces of my final concept along the way.

My first solid concept was discovering obscure places and creating a book that would reveal these places. This was inspired by Keri Smith’s *How to be an Explorer of the World* (fig. 1)—a book that focuses on getting the reader to be critical of and discover the world around

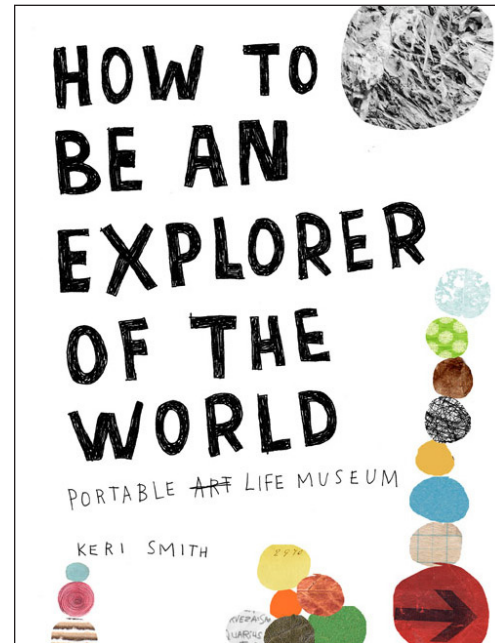


Fig. 1 Keri Smith’s *How to be an Explorer of the World*

them in ways they haven't considered before. The problem I quickly encountered was that there were relatively few genuinely unknown places.

One exception to that statement was Saginaw Forest, a University of Michigan property located near the outside, but still within the bounds of Ann Arbor. The 80-acre piece of land was donated to the University in 1903 and is still used today for research as part of the School of Natural Resources and Environment (Saginaw Forest). What quickly fascinated me about this piece of land was its striking similarity to the dense forests of northern Michigan (fig. 2). The last thing on my mind while exploring the forest was the city of Ann Arbor, instead I wondered about the history of the place and the people that had used the property.

Moving on from the concept of discovering an unknown place, I started to focus on the history of buildings in Ann Arbor that interested me. It was my goal to show the rich history of Ann Arbor by comparing the old and new. This led me to rephotography, or photographing a building from the same point of view that a historical photograph. I was particularly inspired by the "Third View" project, directed by Mark Klett. This project recaptured images taken during the 19th century as part of a survey of the American west (Klett). The direct comparison of the photos, which were so precise they could be viewed directly on top of each other, seemed an excellent means of showing the history of a place (fig. 3).



Fig. 2 Aerial view of Saginaw Forest, Main road in Saginaw Forest



Fig. 3 First and third views of Montezuma's Cathedral, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Although it served as an interesting method of comparing then and now, I quickly became concerned with the amount of time that needed to be put into each photograph in order to compare photos on top of each other. My other issue, which became more important to me in the end, was that people were missing from these photographs (fig. 4). To rephotograph a person would involve staging, which I had no interest in doing as a part of my thesis. I began to question my focus on exploring the history of Ann Arbor until I discovered the true root of my interest in the history of these places.

CONTENT

A substantial part of my four years in college was spent working as a photographer and eventually photo editor for the Michiganian Yearbook. Not only did I work tirelessly to capture the spirit of a year through still images, I was constantly being questioned by my peers: what made a yearbook relevant in the digital age? My answer was that it condensed a year on many different levels, most importantly on a cultural level. While we are unable to individually include thousands of students, the yearbook can provide the answer to the question, “what was 2010 like?” fifty years from now when one might not remember it so clearly.

I sat in the yearbook office one afternoon, browsing some particularly old books. As I put the last book away, I finally had the realization that it was the day-to-day lives of the students who attended the University before me that interested me.

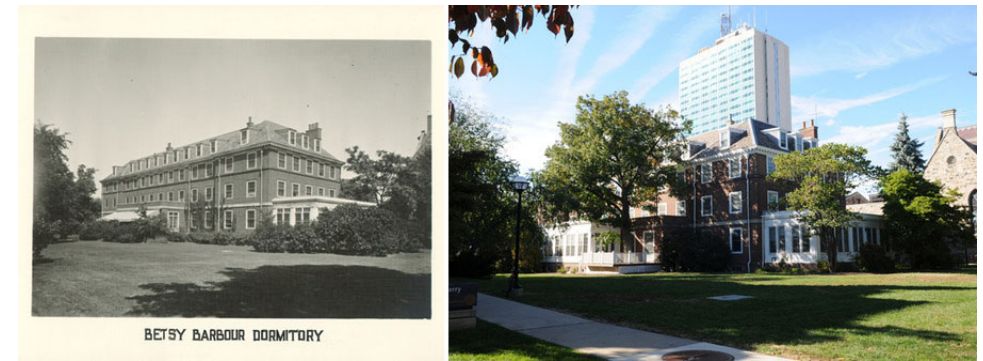


Fig. 4 Betsy Barbour Hall Rephotography

There are three books in the series: Housing, Academics, and Entertainment. The inspiration for the topics of the series came, in part, from the content of the yearbooks I am so familiar with.

The “Housing” book covers the varying options students have had for living on and off campus—dormitories, houses and apartments for rent, co-ops, and the greek system. But it also goes deeper to show the culture and traditions of some of these housing choices. The formerly all-female Stockwell Hall turned co-ed in 2010, bringing the total count of all-female dorms down to three from the original eight that were on campus after Alice Llyod was finished being built in 1949 (fig. 5). The culture in and dorms, such as the Friday teas and annual lunch with the Lawyer’s club in Martha Cook Hall is included (Residence Hall Overviews), along with a glimpse into how technology has changed how students pay for their meals in dining halls.

“Academics” includes the history of schools of the University, along with departments, interesting classes, and notable professors. It also includes the culture of studying over time, from libraries, to studying on the lawn in the diag, to computer labs. Certain activities that students probably can’t imagine any other way because of modern technology have changed drastically over time, such as the process of registering for classes. The stress of wondering if one will get all the classes they want is a more private affair now, taking place on the computer. So it might be difficult for students to imagine having to schedule in a gym full of students with the same worries. One activity that has certainly withstood the test of time and technology, evident



Fig. 5 Moshier-Jordan Hall in March, 1930. The hall was the second female hall in the “Hill” area.

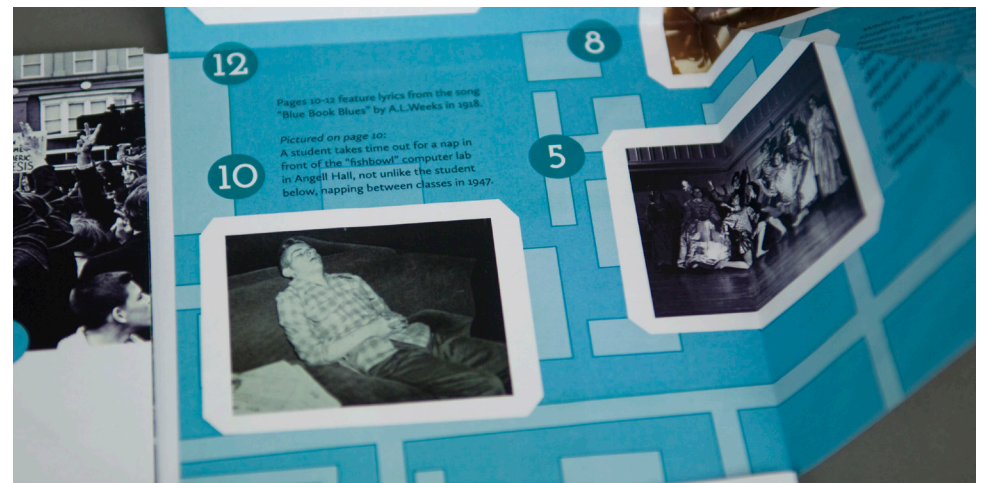


Fig. 6 Students are pictured napping publicly in the “Academics” book.

through the countless photos I encountered, is napping in public places while attempting to study (fig. 6).

The “Entertainment” book covers anything that a student might do for fun on or around campus. Off-campus activities like dance clubs, theatres, and bars, are included along with on-campus activity such as dances hosted in the Union. Football culture is also covered, because having a consistent attendance record of over 100,000 at every game beginning in the mid-70’s is a clear sign that fans are coming to the stadium for the experience and not necessarily to see an excellent game. I believe the assumption among students today is that the Michigan football team has always been wildly successful and popular. However, the record for lowest attendance was 9,190 in 1931 at a game against Wisconsin, making it clear that football was not the “it” activity that year (Michigan Football Attendance) (fig. 7). Parties and drinking culture are also covered, along with the cultures of dating, fashion, and technology.

I was fortunate enough to have a wealth of resources at my disposal while researching and developing my thesis. My strongest resources have been the Bentley Library, the Michiganensian Yearbook, and the Michigan Daily. In addition, I used several other books and publications entirely about the University, which gave me a seemingly endless amount of material to work with. The Yearbook and the Daily have been the most valuable, as they provided not only photos, but generally included a detailed context and date which provided a basis for more research into an interesting photo or topic.



Fig. 7 The “Entertainment” book features high and low points in Michigan football history.

MAPS

From earlier iterations of my thesis project, I knew that I wanted to include a map to add not only another layer of information to the content I was delivering, but also to make the book into an interactive tool to explore the history of the locations depicted. I knew that I wanted viewers to actually travel to the locations when I was working on rephotographing campus and Ann Arbor locations. I felt that the best comparison between then and now was to actually take the historical image to the current location. Adding the map elevates my project past being another historical survey of the campus and adds depth by making a viewer aware of the history of the places they visit on a day-to-day basis (fig. 8). The way the map functions as part of the book was an issue that I struggled with and required me to create a unique book structure to truly integrate the map into the book.

STRUCTURE

Early on in my project I realized that a traditional book form would not be suitable for what I was trying to achieve. I attempted to use different map-folding techniques, including the Turkish map fold, to integrate the map into the traditional form. Ultimately I was unsatisfied by the fact that the map was being placed into a certain section of the book, either the beginning, middle, or end. I felt this would cause the map to lose significance to the viewer and they would subsequently not feel as compelled to explore the actual locations. I

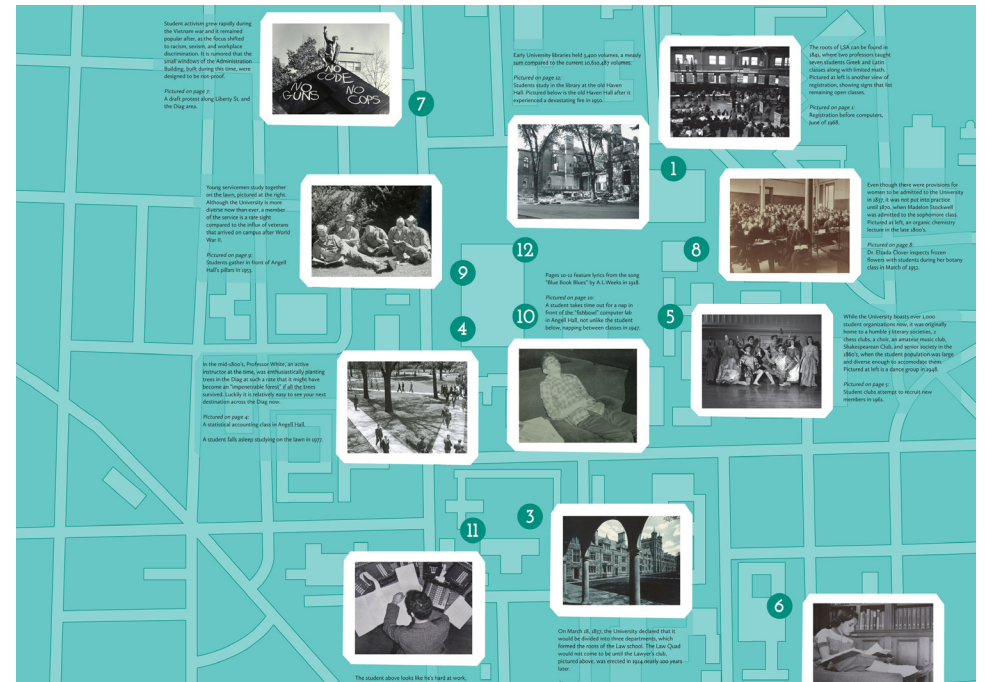


Fig. 8 The completely flattened view of the map inside of the “Academics” book.

knew that the map had to be easily accessible in order for a viewer to feel the most motivated to go to a location.

I stumbled upon a product called map2, or “the zoomable map.”

The concept is that a small square map of London, divided into four quadrants, allows you to pick an area and “zoom” into it despite it being a physical paper map (Stauche) (fig. 9). I immediately felt that something about that structure could be useful for the structure of my own books and set to work on trying to imitate the folding as best I could.

What I eventually discovered was a twist on a basic origami fold called the squash fold. I created four squash folds to form the quadrants that are a part of map2 (fig. 10). The books are five inches wide by ten inches tall, and open to a full twenty by twenty inches when fully unfolded.

The book opens like a traditional structure, but the inside contains four folded quadrants. Each of these quadrants folds over on itself to create three distinctive spreads for information. The whole quadrant can be unfolded to reveal a section of a map underneath which will show where the events or photos in the folds above took place.

THE BOOK AS A WHOLE

This structure finally allowed everything to interact as I had envisioned. The content portion contains a fluid array of photographs and text from across the 200-year span of history at the University. In this



Fig. 9 “The Zoomable Map”



Fig. 10

portion photos and text are not dated to create a sense that while fashions have changed, the core of most of the student life traditions have not. A letter from a son to his mother from the late 19th century about the state of his clothes is juxtaposed with a photo of some young men from the 1950's doing their laundry in the dorms, for instance.

Once you lift up the content section to reveal the map, however, you are then informed of date and location information. In addition, there is practical chronological information included on this layer such as when the first all-female dormitory was opened. The close contact between these two sections at all time, simply the flip of a page, has created a successful amount of access to the maps.

In the exhibition space there was a single hardcover copy and also many "soft cover" takeaways of each book. The takeaway allows a viewer to take my books from a gallery space and easily stand, for example, in the ballroom of the Union as it is now and use the evidence I give them to imagine what it would have been like to attend a weekend dance in the 1940's with a full band playing live music.

Of the 100 takeaway books that I created, none remained at the end of the opening night. Feedback from friends and others revealed that using the books changed their perspective of the campus and made them wonder more about the lives of the students before them. These conversations I had were all the validation I needed to know that "Yesterdays" was a success.



"Yesterdays," pictured on exhibition at the Work: Ann Arbor Gallery without takeaways.

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