Student 1

Field Notes 2/14/20

The first thing you notice when you enter the hangar-like building that houses the UMass All-Campus Maker Space is the amount of *stuff* that fills it; the next is the noise of power tools buzzing from the back room and the fan in the gas hood humming; after that, it’s the smell––not bad or particularly strong, but like a place where things get created––a subtle mix of paint, electricity, metal, and wood. After quickly walking through the three rooms, each separated by green metal doors, propped open––the Front Room, where two male students were using a sewing machine in the middle of the small, cluttered space; the middle room, filled with a big elevated table with light wooden tabletop with a projector resting and pointing to a rolled-up projection screen; and the Workshop, a big open space with stacks of wooden planks, giant power tools, and a table surrounded with what looked to be an engineering class finishing up their session––I stationed myself at the table in the middle room, perched on one of the tall black rolling chairs that surround the table, me back to the humming gas hood in the corner, within full sight of the doors to the other rooms.

Made up of walls of slightly rusted corrugated sheets of gray metal and lit by the three long fluorescent light fixtures hanging all the way across the room, with dark grey cement floors, the middle room appears to be where the workshops that Shira, the director of the Maker Space, told me happen regularly. There’s a gallon-sized Ziploc bag full of colorful wires sitting on the table, as well as a flyer for a Circuit Python Workshop, and a young Asian woman is sitting at a desk against the wall the room shares with the Workshop. She has a laptop open in front of her, propped up on top of a pile of books and a bunch of wires, tools, and a circuit board spread out in front of her. On her laptop screen is a model circuit board, which she looks up at from time to time to as she works.

People walk through the room every couple of minutes. A lot of them are wearing laminated nametags, aprons, and the type of big over-ear headphones I’ve seen construction workers wear. Two male students walk from the Front Room to the Workshop, and one points up to the drone resting on a shelf above the doorway, saying, “did you hear these might be illegal now?” as they walk under it. Everyone seems to have a purpose for being there, and only one person, a young woman whose sandy blonde hair is partially dyed teal, gives me more than a passing, uninterested glance. Through the open door to the Workshop, I watch two young white men use a buzz saw to cut a bunch of planks of wood; the woman with the teal hair buffs something down.

I’m entranced by the material makeup of the room––it’s filled with things I can’t identify, or don’t know the use for. By the rolled-up projector screen is a tall metal shelf with a bunch of cardboard boxes and clear containers, each with a printed label, that I can’t read; a bunch of masks and safety goggle hang from the side of the shelves. There’s a laminated sign hanging from the second shelf that reads, “Please Do Not Use or Remove Materials From These Shelves.” There’s a fire extinguisher next to the door to the Workshop, and an eight-foot-long painted wooden rocket hung parallel to the floor above the desk where the girl is working on her circuit board. Resting on what looks to be a long, very old work table to my right is some sort of oven––a big box with a control panel and some vacuum and vent outlets and a pressure gauge––next to a box from Sitterly Movers with “Shira’s Robot Arm” written in Sharpie on the side.

At 4:30, after I had been there for an hour, the first adult I had seen in the space entered. A white man who looked to be in his 50s, wearing a maroon fedora and carrying a plastic bag full of boxes and wires, shuffled in, walked over to the table, put the bag and his computer down, took off his jacket, walked back into the front room, and came back carrying a box full of wires and circuit boards. After getting everything set up – computer plugged in, box of wires and stuff nearby—he turned to the other guy at the table (an African-American student who had arrived about 10 minutes prior and was sitting across from me doing work on his laptop) and me and said, “Just so you guys know, I’m here officially for the Raspberry Pi thing. If you want to join you can join, if you don’t want to you can stay, however many people will show up will show up, we’ve only had a few come in the past.” I thanked him and asked when the event started, and he said “4:30, which is right now.” I nodded and smiled and said, “Okay, great.” He picked up a little box covered in outlets and began to turn it around; he had some other funky electronic stuff sitting around him. I realized that the box he had gotten from the front room was full of the Raspberry Pis. I remembered seeing a post about the “Raspberry Jam” event on either the Maker Space Instagram or its website yesterday when I was looking it up.