

Noel S. Daring
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The RRCC Main Lobby – A Semiotic Analysis

As a first-semester, freshman student at Red Rocks Community College, I was asked to analyze the semiotic message contained within a campus space for my English 121 class. The main idea behind semiotics is that everything in the world – from novels and poetry to a television commercial or even architecture – contains within it a message that we read, so to speak, and interpret through our own experiences. I understand the necessity of assigning essays to young writers such as myself that exercise our brains, force us to think outside the box, and even focus on topics that bear little-to-no interest for us to write about. Becoming a good writer takes lots of practice, and holding reservations about an assignment often makes it that much harder to complete. Try as I might, though, I couldn't I couldn't get past the 'so what?' rattling around inside my brain – just what was the point in analyzing a campus space?

Reservations aside, I was determined to keep my eyes and mind open to the whole experience. It is true that the particular makeup of a room – from its size to shape, colors, etc. – can greatly affect a person's experience within it. The ancient Chinese aesthetic philosophy of *Feng shui* is built around this fact. As such, I decided to analyze the campus space that both existing students and other visitors experience when stepping inside Red Rocks Community College for the first time – the main lobby.

My closed-mindedness came through on the first day of observation, though, because I found it hard to do anything except take notes on the physical makeup of the room. The sliding glass doors leading into the main lobby from outside open with a heavy *thunk*, placing you in a

large, open, and well-lit space. The main building of Red Rocks Community College is a two-story complex, and the lobby takes full advantage of the available height by leaving out the first-floor ceiling. Windows have been installed on three of the four sides near the ceiling on the second floor which allows ample sunlight to enter the lobby at any given point during the day. The walls have been painted in two different shades – the upper half a stark white to help light bounce around within the space, and the lower half more of a light grey to help neutralize the available light down at eye-level. The flooring is made of commercial-grade turquoise and white ceramic square tiles, and three pillars within the lobby have been painted a dark red to offer a splash of color to the otherwise generally banal paint scheme. Stairs leading up to the second floor are positioned to the far left along the back side of the lobby's space, next to what appears to be a wide, white-colored pillar that is actually an elevator shaft. The rest of the back side of the lobby opens up to one of the main hallways within the school, which also provides a near-perfect view of the entrance to the admissions and financial aid offices.

Along the left-hand wall of the main lobby sits the school's help desk, a place where phone calls are fielded and people can ask for directions to classrooms or obtain other general assistance. A beautiful sculptural painting takes up most of the space on the two-story wall behind the help desk, made up of blocks of various sizes to create an interpretation of one of Leonardo DaVinci's most famous anatomical sketches of the male human form. The desk itself is made of pine or some other light-colored wood, its finish uniform with every other piece of wood found within the lobby, from tables and chairs to an awards display case, and a grandfather clock near the stairs leading up to the second level. The only other item I bothered

to take note of on the first day was a podium with a map of the school campus, which sat next to the grandfather clock near the stairs.

It wasn't until I returned to the main lobby, almost begrudgingly, a few days later for a second round of observation that I began to notice my own experience within the space itself. It was later in the afternoon this time around so a fair amount of the campus population had cleared out for the day, leaving the lobby area empty and eerily quiet. Growing tired of taking notes, I decided to take a break and let my mind wander for a few minutes. The main lobby I noticed, being large and spacious, gives off a feeling of grandeur or importance, but not in such a way as to leave me feeling small or insignificant while standing in its presence. The natural sunlight pouring in from the windows high above provides the lobby with a warm and inviting feeling instead of the row-upon-row of fluorescent lighting I remember from high school. Here I feel like Red Rocks Community College has a sense of importance of self-worth to it, and that I am welcome to become part of the 'larger' experience, as it were.

A closer examination of the sculptural painting behind the front desk also revealed itself to be a supplementary element necessary to my experience within the main lobby. Designed by Lonnie Hanzon at Hanzon Studios, Inc. and dedicated to the school on March 12, 1997, *Knowledge Network: A Palimpsest* is constructed of carved wood and uses acrylic paints with a urethane finish. As mentioned earlier, the artwork is a sort-of interpretation of one of Leonardo DaVinci's most famous anatomical sketches of the male human form. The human features of the man are distinct from the waist up, the easily identifiable two sets of arms extending out to show range of motion re-created to near perfection. But the artwork, as a copy of DaVinci's

sketch, stops there. From the waist down, the man's body twists and distort, almost grotesquely, into a series of what becomes apparent as roots to a tree. The man's waist and chest thus become the tree's trunk, while his arms and head extend up into the tree's canopy with bright green leaves colored in behind. Dark, earthy tones of brown and red are used down at the base of the sculpture where the man's legs root the tree to the ground, and the color scheme gradually becomes lighter with bright shades of blue, purple, and yellow as the eye moves upward towards the top. A small image of the Buddha rests just above the man's pelvis, adding an element of cultural diversity to an otherwise exclusively western-European feel.

My eyes now fixated on and absorbing the sculptural painting in its entirety, I had the feeling that this man was coming up from some past – and possibly even dark – personal existence, and blossoming into a new and totally different person. The sculpture I think is a symbolic representation of all students who embark on the journey of higher education, and as such is a complimentary accessory to the main lobby itself. Lonnie Hanzon's creation also struck a personal chord within me because I am currently in the process of making amends for past mistakes and bringing positive changes into my life, one of the most important being to further my own education.

I chose to enroll at Red Rocks Community college because I feel like they are proud to support a diverse student population where creativity, individualism, and personal growth on our own terms is encouraged, instead of trying to force one cookie-cutter version of education down our throats. One of the most beautiful things about the human condition is the diversity within it. There are so many cultures and different walks-of-life a person born into this world

can journey down, and the culmination of what our experiences have to offer in evoking learning and change is a big part of what makes us great.

So as my second day of observation came to an end, I realized that analyzing the main lobby of Red Rocks as a visual, semiotic text was more than simply regurgitating a list of physical features about a campus space. It is about recognizing the message carried from within that text, and how that message is translated through to not only myself, but all the people it connects with each and every day. And the message I received, which I hope reaches all students here at this extraordinary school, is that here I have the opportunity to be a true participant in life – not just a bystander.