Emergency Blue Light Phones & The Evolution Of Campus Safety Measures

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SECURITY CALL STATIONS

Criteria

1. Use a simple design which is compatible with campus surroundings and other site elements but is unique enough to be easily identifiable. A single unit should be used across the campus.

2. Locate security call stations in highly visible and accessible areas. Remote areas and major pedestrian corridors which are heavily used in the evening hours should receive priority, but location decisions should also consider early arrival/shift activity, criminal activity, and campus recommendations.

3. Illuminate the unit internally.

Recommendations

1. The unit should be located contiguous to, but just off, major pedestrian walks. In order to facilitate grass cutting and related maintenance, the post should be set within a 2' x 2' paved area contiguous with the existing pavement.

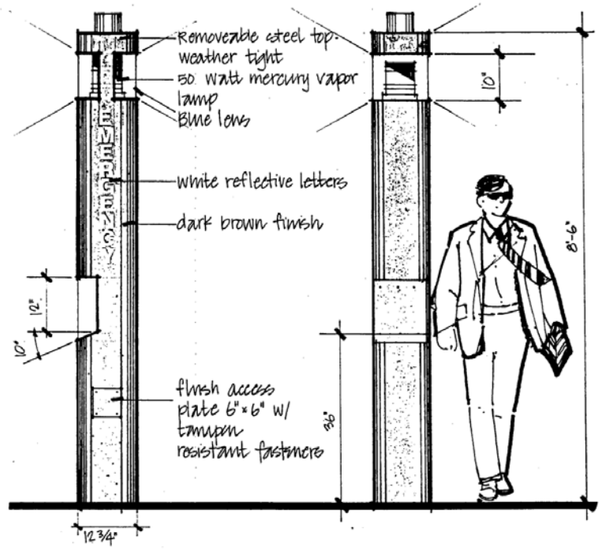
2. Since blue is the international symbol for emergencies, the unit should have a blue illuminated panel at or near the top of the cylindrical post. White letters spelling out "Emergency" should be located either on the blue panel (preferred location) or on the metal cylinder which supports it.

3. An emergency phone or push plate should be easily accessible but recessed within the cylindrical unit.

4. The unit should be designed to allow future removal of the strobe light.

5. The unit's finish color should be dark brown (see Furniture Color) to match other site furniture components.

The approved design of the security call unit is illustrated on the following page.



SECURITY CALL STATION

Pages 197 & 198 respectively of UIC's 1991 technical report

In 1989, the University of Illinois at Chicago faced increasing pressure to keep students safe on their urban campus, so they contracted the development of the first 'security call stations' which were modeled to be smaller, illuminated police call boxes.

The Clery Act passed in 1990, named for a college student who was murdered in their dorm, it required colleges and Universities to publicly report campus crime statistics. This forced a spotlight on campus safety and universities began adopting 'security call stations'.

1989 - 1990

"100% of [large] private schools have a blue light phone system as well as 92% of all university campuses."

- Campus Safety Magazine

2005

2005 marked the peak utility of blue light emergency phones as they had come to be known, 15 years since they first rolled out and still a few years before universal cellphone and smartphone ownership.

In 2023, emergency blue light phones simply don't serve the functional purpose they used to. In this current moment, nearly every student, faculty member, and person in the general public carries around a device with the ability to call emergency services, and faster, than using an emergency phone - the smartphone.

To fully understand the utility of the emergency blue light phone and whether or not is a technological relic, we must first understand where these objects are located, what they're made of, what they do, and what they do for people.

The grid to the right serves as a key to the six panels below the timeline (1.6).



Emergency blue light phones seen across the University of Michigan's campus in 2023.

Mapping

Identifies all emergency blue light phones on central campus (1.1).

Identifying

Labels

Modeling

Rendered model of a modern blue light phone (1.7). Upper panel contains an inset of modern call panel, lower panel contains an inset of an old call box; cross panel labeling throughout.

Materials & Questioning

Material breakdown (1.3) and additional inquiry.

Actions & Data

Understanding the purpose of each component (1.4) and the data it produces (1.5).

"For students ... the lights provide a sense of comfort walking around campus."

- The Daily Illini

"[One officer] compared the phones to fire extinguishers: You don’t need them till you need them."

- The Chronicle of Higher Education

For the near, foreseeable future, emergency phones are here to stay.

Despite high maintenance costs, sentiment is that even if seldom used, the towers provide a sense of comfort for students and families, they operate as ‘security theater’ providing the sense of safety mores so than safety itself.

Even from a university’s perspective, the upkeep cost to maintain the phones lower than a potential lawsuit that could arise from not having them.

2033

2053 - B

We may not know what the future of campus safety will look like in 30 years.

Emergency blue light phones were first introduced 30 years ago and their effectiveness is currently up for debate.

For all we know AI facial recognition monitoring systems will be commonplace on by 2053 and one’s safety is left to an algorithm.



2053 - A



One possibility for the distant future is enhanced emergency blue light phones that incorporate some form of active monitoring, such as mounted security cameras.

These have been implemented selectively, as installation of these more modern towers requires a substantially more significant investment and for an aging system in need of replacement.

This would continue the notion of the towers operating as ‘security theater’, they would continue to serve as safety eye-candy while being minimally effective in an emergency.

Blue Phone Box

Observed Box:
Non-functioning Light

Observed Box:
Functioning Light

University of Michigan
Central Campus

Liberty

Huron

State

N. University

Observatory

Geddes

S. University

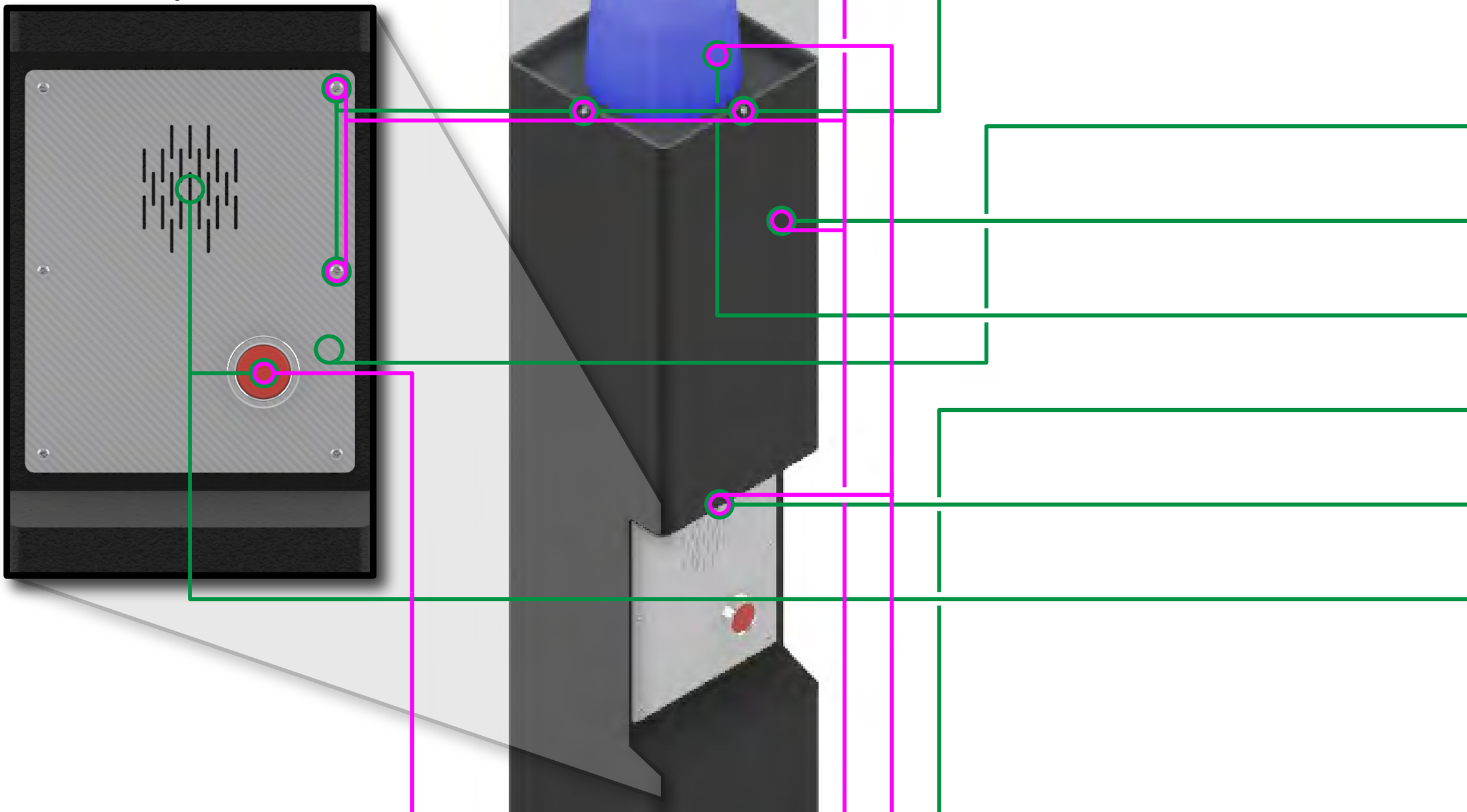
Forest

Washtenaw

Packard

2023

Modern Blue Light Call Panel Inset



Manufacturing

Illinois
Clear Acrylic

United States
Stainless Steel Bolts

Indiana
3/16” Steel Sheets

China
Powder Coated Epoxy

Reading, Pennsylvania
*LED Strobe**

Texas
Concrete

Reading, Pennsylvania
*LED Panel Light**

Reading, Pennsylvania
*RED ALERT Control Box**

Processing

Houston, Texas
Acrylonitrile

Indiana
Iron

Indiana
Carbon

Indiana
Chromium

China
Epoxy

China
Pigment

Texas
Cement

Extraction

United States
Petroleum

Minnesota
Iron Ore

Wyoming
Graphite

South Africa
Chromite

China
Resin

China
Varies

Eastern Seaboard
Limestone

Ohio, Pennsylvania
Clay

California, Texas
Sand

China
Gravel

Even though we have emergency service calling devices on us 99% of the time, it’s knowing that the emergency blue light phones are there for us in that 1% instance that gives us comfort, and thus reason to keep them.

Because even though functionally obsolete, they provide a visual sense of security which to the average passerby negates the surface level lack of utility.

A smartphone accomplishes these same three essential tasks from your pocket, which functionally makes emergency blue light phones obsolete. So why still have them?

The control panel consists of a button to call emergency services, a microphone to talk to them, and a speaker to hear them.

The interactions that result in the most crucial functions of the emergency phone, that being the contacting of emergency services, comes from just the control panel.

**Indicates an element manufactured in house by GAI-TRONICS from complex parts*

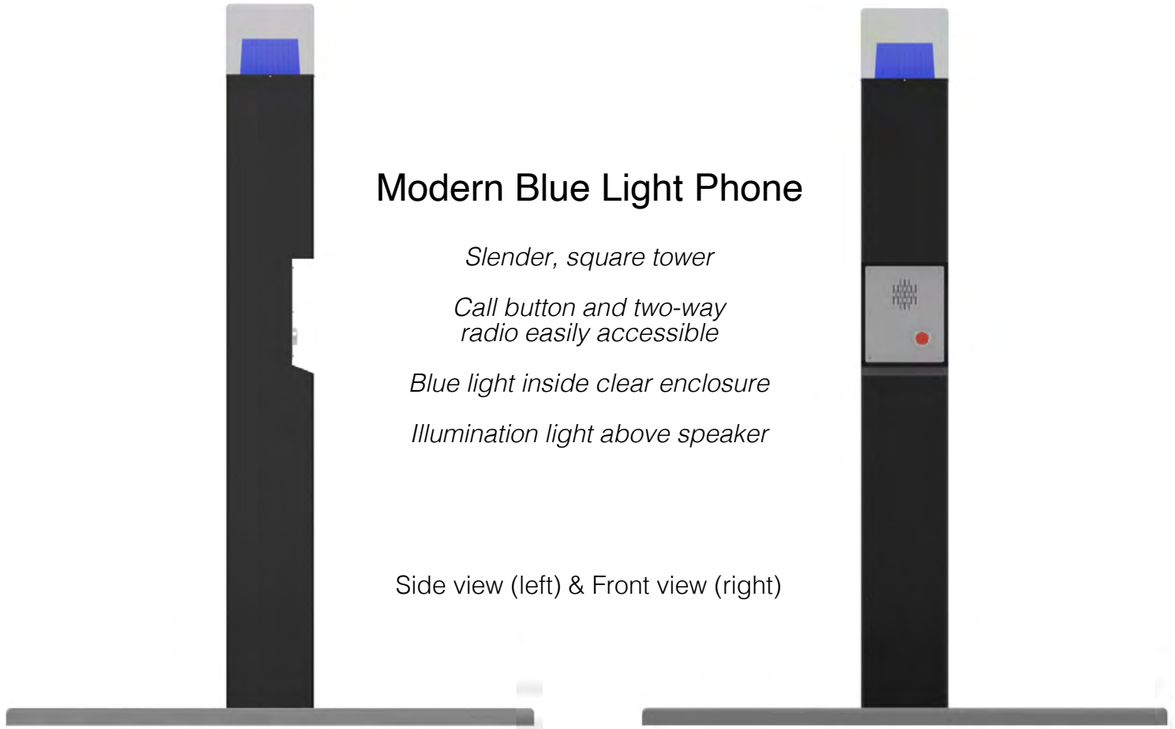
Modern Blue Light Phone

Slender, square tower

Call button and two-way radio easily accessible

Blue light inside clear enclosure

Illumination light above speaker



Side view (left) & Front view (right)

Old Blue Light Phone

Larger, circular tower

Call button and two-way radio inside hinged red box

Blue light inside frosted enclosure

Illumination light above red box



Side view (left) & Front view (right)

Elements of a Blue Light Phone

Blue Light Enclosure

Visable Blue Light

Fasteners

Pillar Enclosure

Illumination Light

Enclosed Call Box

Two-Way Radio

Emergency Call Button

Tapered Ledge

Concrete Platform



Old Blue Light Call Box Inset



Action	Input	Output	Data Type	Data Takeaway
Button *“Emergency Trigger”*	*Human* *Touch*	*Human* *Emergency Dispatch*	*Binary* *Pressed, Not Pressed*	*Emergency* *Pressed indicates state of emergency*
Control Box *“Microphone”*	*Human* *Audio Information*	*Human* *Emergency Dispatch*	*String* *Infinite combinations*	*Emergency* *Individual in need provides status*
Control Box *“Speaker”*	*Human* *Audio Support*	*Human* *Emergency Dispatch Assurance*	*String* *Infinite combinations*	*Emergency* *Emergency services explain procedure*
Blue Light, Illumination Light *“Identifier”*	*Human* *Visibility*	*Human* *Knowledge*	*Binary* *On, Off*	*Constant* *Indicates its presence in case of emergency*
Blue Light, Illumination Light *“Illumination”*	*Electrical* *Electricity*	*Electrical* *Viability*	*Binary* *On, Off*	*Constant* *Provides viability and assurance*
Blue Light *“Flash”*	*Human* *Button Press*	*Electrical* *Flashing Light Control Box Functions*	*Binary* *On, Off*	*Emergency* *Flashing indicates state of emergency*
Enclosures, Steel, Platform, Fasteners *“Elemental Protection”*	*Nature* *Precipitation Debris Animals*	*Static* *Deflection Protection*	*Not Applicable* *The static components of the blue light emergency phone system comprises the physical tower.* *At their core they only exist to protect and maintain the lighting, communication, and other electronic elements of the system.* *One could collect data on these elements, however it would not be strictly meaningful.*	
Enclosures, Steel, Platform, Fasteners *“Structural Stability”*	*Nature, Human* *Precipitation Debris Weight*	*Static* *Deflection Support*		