

Talking Stick

The Authoritative Source
for Campus Housing

UNCOMMONLY GOOD SPACE

The merits of
common space

July + August 2013
Volume 30, Number 6

www.acuho-i.org

Published by the Association
of College and University Housing
Officers - International



The concept of "see and be seen" governs the design of common spaces.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF CBT ARCHITECTS

Common Space for the Common Good

The strategic design of common spaces enriches the residence hall experience.

By Emily Cotter and Christopher Hill

How does a student know it is okay to walk through a lounge where they notice other occupants and feel awkward about intruding upon the space? What's the protocol? Should they walk through or back track to the nearest exit? Luckily, contemporary hall design gives students cues to help them determine how to navigate their residence halls. And one of the most critical components of this design is common space. When carved out and placed strategically in the floor plan, common space helps to define the most private and most public spaces of the hall: The physical structure gives students guidelines for where to navigate and when. They learn where interactions are encouraged and where privacy needs to be preserved. Today's residence halls are considerably different from halls of the past, which had limited common space that was one-dimensional in nature and often isolated to the lower levels. Today, common spaces can take many forms and can be located on many floors. This helps create physically and psychologically welcoming spaces that foster student growth and happiness.



Common spaces converge at the building entry where everyone can see and be seen.

In the February 1987 issue of *Talking Stick*, Edward Dadez described the difference between a dormitory and a residence hall in terms of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The "dormitory philosophy" tends to the most basic levels of human needs – shelter and safety – while the "residence hall philosophy" takes these basic needs as a given and looks to higher levels of need, which include a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Those who adopt the residence hall philosophy "perceive their building to be more than just dormitories where residents sleep, study, and live passively. They perceive them to be living-learning centers where students are provided learning experiences which assist in facilitating their developmental awareness of self and others."

Part of the residence hall philosophy is a focus on the strategic use of common space, which differs greatly from the incidental common space in earlier dormitory design. In most cases, the common space in these older buildings consisted of a lounge, usually located in a secluded or out-of-the-way area, such as the basement or at the end of a first-floor hallway. It was a seldom used and often neglected asset that, because of its seclusion, sustained much damage, was territorialized by neighboring residents, and lacked a sense of security and comfort.

In contrast, strategic common space is the result of careful consideration and calculation, planned in response to students' physical and psychological needs. The contemporary lounge focuses social energy, working in conjunction with other spaces that are tailored to class standing (first-year through senior), shared interests (scholastic and extracurricular), and the need for variety (options for privacy and socialization). Such strategic common space encourages academic, personal, and social development, thus boosting overall student satisfaction. It also supports an institution's administrative goals by attracting students, fostering academic missions, and strengthening cultural identities.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STRATEGIC COMMON SPACE

In recent years, strategic common space has become a hallmark of the planning and design of a residence hall. Experienced designers and housing officials pay particular attention to the issues of location, sequence, type/activity, and size/quantity. How these design elements converge in the residence hall determines how effectively they provide physical and psychological support for the residents.

Location: See and Be Seen

The lounge area is the most visible type of common space. Today the concept of "see and be seen" governs the design of these spaces, which occupy a central heavily traveled location. Designers position common lounge space as both a destination and a circulatory path, compelling students to encounter one another – to pass by or through the action – as they travel through the residence hall. Whether the common spaces house scheduled activities or impromptu gatherings, situating these spaces in core locations encourages student interactions and chance meetings. The central location concentrates social energy, which fosters socialization.

Centrally located common spaces provide students with options for how and when they interact with their peers. To illustrate the psychological significance of the "see and be seen" concept, imagine two scenarios. Both involve a student – let's call her Mary – who leaves her room, headed for the common lounge to study. In the first scenario, the lounge is located at the end of the hall. Mary makes some popcorn and heads down the hall toward the lounge. She turns the corner into the secluded lounge and finds a couple in the midst of a tense conversation. Awkwardness follows. The couple sees Mary and looks embarrassed; Mary feels like an intruder and quickly leaves, hastening

back to her room, popcorn in hand.

In the second scenario, the lounge is situated in a central location. Mary grabs her popcorn and walks down the hall, which passes through the lounge. Here she encounters the arguing couple, but Mary just keeps walking as if headed another place entirely. The central location of the common lounge alters Mary's and the couple's interactions, and all are spared the awkwardness of an intrusion.

Students who are uncomfortable about appearing intrusive may end up avoiding the secluded lounge altogether. Its location directly shapes the use (and non-use) of the space, as well as the ways this space is perceived by students and administrators. Students with rooms near the out-of-the-way lounge often lay claim to this common area, which results in other students feeling unwelcome or out of place. In addition, this space can be easily vandalized because it is shielded from view. Combined with the risk of awkward encounters, territorialization and disrepair keep most students from using the space at all. Then administrators who visit the damaged, unused lounge may come to the understandable conclusion that common living areas are a waste of funds. Yet the problem is the location, not the common space itself.

To avoid the pitfalls associated with secluded common living spaces, designers and housing officials prefer to centralize lounge areas. Rod Crafts, dean of student life at Olin College in Needham, Massachusetts, turned to the core lounge concept when developing East Hall. The core lounge organizes the residence hall as a whole, and the main entrance/common stair of each floor leads to this central space, which includes an entertainment center with a variety of seating options. Study rooms, a recycling center, and the resident assistant's room surround the lounge, and the three residential wings extend from this core space. Doors and glass partitions separate the more public lounge area from the semi-private and private space of the wings beyond.

The design of East Hall's core

lounge highlights the concept of transparency, which accompanies the notion of “see and be seen.” Clear glass separates the study rooms from the entertainment center, providing a physical barrier that buffers the noise from the adjacent lounge. At the same time, the barrier is transparent; the glass allows a visual connection between the spaces – those inside see out, and those outside see in. Because these study rooms accommodate a variety of uses – aside from small-group study sessions, these spaces often serve as meeting rooms for on-campus clubs – transparency becomes especially important, exposing students in the lounge and those passing by to the special interests of the club meeting beyond the glass.

Similar considerations can be made for other types of common space. At Miami University in Ohio, a new residence hall’s communal kitchen reflects the “see and be seen” concept. Jerry Olson, Miami’s director

of residence life, notes that instead of being hidden in the basement, the kitchen abuts the residence hall’s first-floor entry. Often used by students to bake birthday cakes, the kitchen provides an area for students to gather while the baking occurs. Glass expanses establish a connection with the outside, maximizing the kitchen’s high-visibility location. This visual link encourages students to enter, while a bank of stools offers a spot to linger while keeping the bakers company.

The “see and be seen” concept does more than offer options for social engagement; it also helps regulate students’ behavior in these spaces, preventing unwanted or destructive activities from occurring. Everyone sees the people using the space and what they are doing. The result is a form of peer-induced self-policing. If a group leaves a mess behind or vandalizes a common area, others will easily identify the responsible parties. Students thus feel accountable for their actions and

are more inclined to treat the areas with respect.

Sequence: From Public to Private

The organization of Olin’s East Hall guides internal movement, creating a natural flow from public to private. This begins at the threshold to the building, where students move from the public foyer to the semi-public lounge area. To move deeper into the private realm, they pass through a door to a residential wing. The door reduces noise traveling from the semi-public to the semi-private space, while the abutting glass extends a visual link. The final progression from the semi-private to the private occurs in the transition from the hall to a bedroom, suite, or apartment, depending on the floor’s configuration.

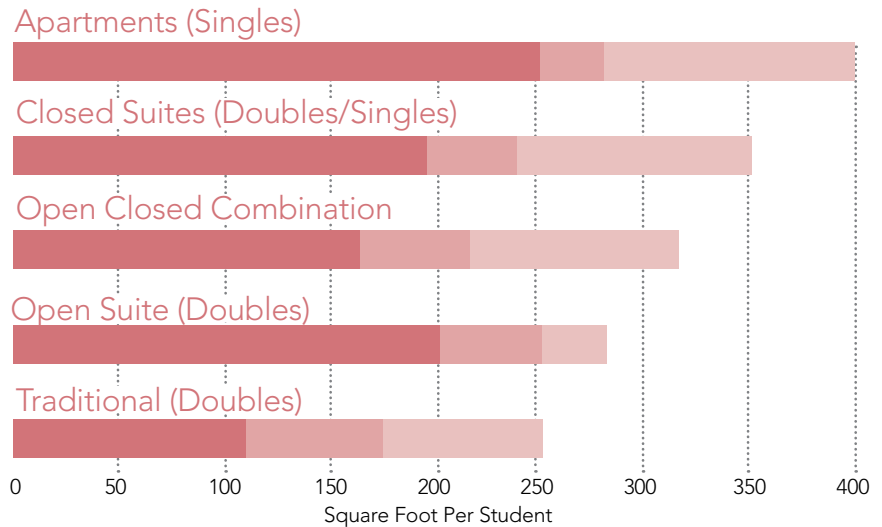
When a residence hall includes a core lounge, the orchestrated procession from public to private



Common Space Varies by Housing Type

- NSF/Student
- NSF/Common
- GSF/Student

Source: Janet Stegman Associates



increases the chances of social engagement. By virtue of the path taken from the entry to the bedroom, the student will no doubt see and be seen along the way. This raises the likelihood that this student will meet other students and eventually form relationships, which fosters a sense of belonging and attachment to the internal neighborhood. Indeed, the procession from public to private cultivates neighborhood-like interactions, where students stop and chat on their way to and from their rooms.

The public-to-private movement also acts as a security measure. Students know their neighbors by sight and can recognize if someone is out of place. At Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, the procession from public to private governs vertical organization. Judson Newbern, Vanderbilt's deputy vice chancellor, notes that the residence halls house large entry-level common spaces that are used by campus-wide groups. Instead of keycards being needed for admittance through the building's main doors, they are needed instead for admittance to the elevators that access the residential floors. When students enter the elevators, they can quickly identify anyone who seems out of place.

To multiply the opportunities for social interaction and promote a sense



Please contact Academic Services

1-800-994-0165 x2618

www.microfridge.com

- MicroFridge®'s Safe Plug patent pending power management system is designed to conserve energy and prevent circuit overloads.
- Superior 10 year warranty - the best in the industry.
- Dual Charging Station - A brand new feature that makes it easy and convenient to charge personal electronic devices.



MicroFridge® and Safe Plug® are registered trademarks of Intirion Corporation. © Intirion Corporation 2012





A common kitchen and lounge are located adjacent to the main area of circulation and to outdoor spaces.

of security, the procession from public to private is repeated at a smaller scale throughout the residence hall. Within the privacy of an open suite, a closed suite, or an apartment, this processional motif creates a similar spatial arrangement. The semi-public central lounge gives way to a semi-private space (a suite), which provides entrance to the private bedroom.

Janice Kassman, former dean of students at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, emphasizes that three scales of common living space appear in Anthony-Mitchell-Schupf (AMS) Hall. The first and smallest scale appears in each open or closed suite, providing a place for suitemates to congregate. The second scale appears on each floor, allowing inhabitants of the different suites and rooms to meet and interact. The third and largest scale can accommodate hall-wide meetings, parties, lectures, and other social events. The private, floor, and building-wide common gathering spaces are all

located at the core of their respective environments, allowing multiple chances for students to interact.

Size/Quantity: Common Space Tailored to Class Standing

The different scales of common living space found in AMS Hall – a combination hall containing singles, doubles, open suites, and closed suites – relate to the varying needs of students as they move through their college careers. Janet Stegman, principal and owner of the firm Stegman + Associates Architects, PC in Boston, Massachusetts, who specializes in the planning and design of higher education facilities, explains that living choices change with class standing, ranging from traditional doubles for first-year students to apartments for seniors (see graphic). In each of these arrangements, available common living space varies by housing type; the

square footage of common living space tends to decrease as the housing types become more self-contained. Halls with traditional doubles offer the greatest square footage of common living space, while those housing apartments provide the least.

According to Stegman, the varying amounts of common space afforded to different housing types relate directly to the students' class standing. First-year students commonly reside in traditional doubles, where two students share a bedroom and have access to communal bathrooms and common living spaces on the floor. In such circumstances, designers provide large common living areas. In fact, in existing residence halls slated for renovation – most of which feature traditional doubles – plans often include the removal of beds to free square footage for common living space. These areas offer a place for students to escape the shared private

CONTINUES ► 50 ...

A Fresh Perspective on Traditional Excellence



Thurston

We have a new look! Our new logo and website reflect our pride in our past and our confidence in our future.

For almost 30 years, Thurston has designed and produced high quality, functional furniture with special attention to durability and sustainability. We stand behind our products to deliver exceptional customer service to the educational housing market.

We have changed our appearance, but Thurston's commitment to excellence remains solid.

**We have furniture in stock!
Call Today for Fast Delivery!
800-624-9101**

Your look, your way, one room at a time.

Come see our new website!
www.Thurstonmfg.net





space of their room, encounter other students, and gather in larger groups. This counteracts the threat of isolation new students face, easing the first-year transition to a collegiate environment. The common living space offers a place for students to explore diversity, practice interpersonal skills, and develop the relationships that will help them thrive during the next few years.

By the time students become seniors, most have already formed strong relationships. They opt for smaller communities, now choosing specific living mates and more private settings. The most self-contained arrangement is the apartment, which has its own common living space, bathroom, and kitchen. Designed to accommodate a few older students, apartment common spaces are smaller than those in residence halls for first-year students. This configuration encourages students to become more responsible for their own space. While a building custodian maintains the common living spaces in traditional residence halls, students in apartments must learn to share responsibility for the bathroom, living, and kitchen spaces. In such ways, the apartment provides a training ground for life after graduation.

Type/Activity: Multipurpose, Programmed, and Exterior Space

Common space in residence halls may be multipurpose, mixed-use, or designed to accommodate specific activities. From practice or seminar rooms to dirty project rooms to kitchens, a range of programmed common spaces now appear throughout residence halls. These areas allow students to take part in certain activities and engage with others who share similar interests.

Building on the idea of shared interests, some college and university housing officials intentionally group

like-minded students in residential communities, such as in honors or substance-free residence halls. At Miami University, living-learning communities (LLCs) help to organize the lives of first-year students. Incoming students select housing by thematic interest, not by location. These themes reflect academic or cultural topics and are tied to required curricular offerings; thus, living-learning communities offer built-in connections – students live with others who share a particular interest and take the same set of related academic courses. Faculty advisors live on site, further strengthening and supporting the thematic interests that link the students. Discussing Miami University's long-range housing plan, Olson highlights the key role that common space plays in the LLCs. Both the newly constructed residence halls and those undergoing renovation will feature common space in a variety of sizes to accommodate and encourage different types of activities. Multipurpose rooms can change function based on the hall's theme. For example, in the "Celebrate the Arts" community, a multipurpose room could hold areas for sculpture or photography.

Common space extends beyond the walls of the residence hall to include outdoor space, which can be shaped by buildings and landscape features. Buildings create larger courtyards, within which trees, shrubs, and other vegetation define more intimately scaled spaces. Newbern indicates that such a strategy activates the outdoor space associated with Vanderbilt University's new residence halls. Because the temperate Nashville climate permits a high degree of porosity between the buildings' ground level spaces and the courtyards they shape, so these residence halls maintain a strong connection between interior and exterior spaces.

Grassy courtyards, outside classrooms, skateboard rail jams – a range of outdoor common spaces

populate college and university campuses. At Miami University, administrators have consciously planned for outdoor gathering spaces adjacent to the residence halls. These include a barbeque area with a grill and benches, a shared green space for impromptu athletic games, and a patio that connects two nearby halls. As expected, such outside spaces support the LLC themes. For the "Celebrate the Arts" community, the patio can serve as an outdoor performance venue, offering a place for creative displays to engage neighboring LLCs.

DON'T FORGET THE BATHROOMS!

Contemporary discussions of residence halls often focus on common space as a social condenser, a place that encourages student interactions. Yet when it comes to common bathroom and showering facilities, the emphasis is on privacy, which in turn facilitates inclusivity.

When planning bathroom facilities for new and renovated residence halls, designers no longer rely on the group bathroom arrangement that characterized traditional residence halls. They now compartmentalize toilet and shower fixtures. True partitions – walls and doors for the toilets, and doors or curtained-off changing areas for the showers – set the fixtures apart, preserving users' privacy. These gender-inclusive facilities also reflect the notion of inclusivity that colleges and universities embrace. And unlike single-occupancy restrooms, compartmentalized bathroom spaces permit simultaneous use of the shower and the toilet by different students. The compartmentalized bathroom works in all types of housing configurations, from doubles and open or closed suites to apartments.

Compartmentalized fixtures require more square footage than their grouped counterparts, but the extra cost is an acceptable sacrifice to ensure

greater student comfort. Another nod to student comfort involves the placement of a single-occupancy bathroom on each floor of a residence hall, adjacent to the common lounge space. This arrangement keeps visitors from entering the students' semi-private realm. Furthermore, students who desire complete privacy can use this self-contained bathroom. The compartmentalized approach and the inclusion of single-occupancy bathrooms address practical concerns as well as psychological ones, namely the need for privacy and comfort.

STRATEGIC COMMON SPACES PROMOTE STUDENT SUCCESS

The traditional residence hall satisfied

students' basic physical needs, but today's residence halls address their psychological needs as well. Strategic common space plays a key role in these efforts. Core lounge space, common space modified for class standing, flexible and activity-specific spaces, and compartmentalized bathroom facilities combine to create a supportive student environment. These well-considered common spaces promote socialization, facilitate learning opportunities, encourage relationships, and contribute to high levels of student satisfaction.

Student satisfaction benefits both students and administration. Student satisfaction not only positively correlates to student retention, but it also impacts the attachments that students form to their institutions. Students with high levels of satisfaction tend to feel a greater allegiance to their school during their years on campus

and after graduation, a sense of loyalty that strengthens student and alumni communities, working to everyone's advantage.

In the competition to attract new students, newly upgraded residence halls work as a selling point. By creating activity-specific places for events, strategic common spaces both reflect and help shape a school's cultural identity. Finally, strategic common space facilitates a school's academic mission. Housing classroom space, faculty quarters, and study areas alongside other living spaces, today's residence halls provide physical and psychological support for students throughout their college experiences. **TS**

Emily Cotter

is a public relations coordinator for CBT Architects in Boston, Massachusetts.

Christopher Hill

is a principal with CBT Architects.



RECYCLE

Keep your old mattresses out of the landfill
with

AMERICAN BEDDING'S

new mattress recycling program

Full-Service Program:

- DELIVER
- REMOVE
- INSTALL
- RECYCLE

Cost Competitive

to removal with landfill programs



www.americanbeddingmfg.com ~ 800.203.2507 ~ sales@americanbeddingmfg.com