

Residential Common Spaces That Really Work

A Post-Occupancy Study

by **Julia Nugent**

Lively and cohesive residential communities, those that engage students and create a sense of belonging, provide more than shelter and security. The most successful campus housing supports the academic and developmental needs of students. Residential common areas are the primary venue for students to form social connections and shape their communities.

But sometimes we build it and they *don't* come. Why does one room sit empty while another is alive with activity 24-7? What types of spaces actually foster the resident students' personal, social, and academic growth? Is the money spent truly having a positive impact?

The Massachusetts State College Building Authority (MSCBA), the entity that plans, designs, finances, and constructs all of the student life facilities for the system's nine campuses, decided it needed to find out. The MSCBA was undertaking an ambitious residential construction and renewal process, and it wanted to be confident that the dollars would be spent where they mattered most.

The MSCBA launched the Residential Common Space Study to evaluate 15 of its new or newly renovated residential buildings and characterize in quantitative and qualitative terms the buildings' public spaces and their effect on residential communities. In short, the MSCBA sought guidelines for common space programming and design that could be readily duplicated in upcoming projects.

The MSCBA hired two consultants, an architect and a planner, to work with the agency and the residential life directors on each campus.

The team found dynamic residential communities on each of the campuses studied: in older and newer buildings, in halls with small and large populations, and in buildings for first-year and upper-class students. Nearly any building can house a positive community, but the best share a few themes.

But, before we get to how to design great common spaces, let's look more closely at why common spaces are central to the residential experience.

First, academic pedagogy is changing rapidly, with increasing emphasis on project-based learning and social interaction. Current learning theories focus on transactions between people, group work products in a variety of media, and multiple learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.). A well-programmed residence hall is an ideal location for this nontraditional course work.

Second, campuses are no longer compartmentalized—students eat in the library, take seminars in their residence hall, and do research anywhere that has Wi-Fi and a comfortable seat. Students are infinitely more connected to resources—they carry smartphones, laptops, and tablets and are able to access in seconds, information that once took hours to track down. Texting and Facebook have replaced the corridor as the location for casual interaction. Paradoxically, this connectivity can be isolating, and residence halls designed for earlier generations inadvertently isolate students further by providing very little space for them to have face-to-face conversations. They need places to MIRL (meet in real life) outside of their dorm rooms.

Finally, college is not exclusively an academic experience. We hope that our students are also learning how to be adults and members of society. College is usually the first setting where they are obliged to wash their own laundry, get themselves to class on time, and wait politely for the next available shower. They encounter new ideas, form and reform groups, and learn to tolerate differences. They pursue personal interests, take on leadership opportunities, and start to see themselves as individuals connected to a larger community. Much of this part of the college experience takes place in the common spaces of residence halls.

The goal of the MSCBA Residential Common Space Study was to find those spaces that best support the broad mission of college: the academic, social, and personal development of students. In the case of this statewide system, the housing on all campuses rose to the challenge, but each campus's distinct physical and cultural setting presented a unique context for residential life. So, while the team identified many universal principles for what works best, it also found that one size does not always fit all. Program preferences voiced at one campus were often the opposite of those expressed at another. But, it is clear that the variety and range of options within each campus and across the state college system is part of what makes the residential life programs vital and popular.

Public areas in all parts of the buildings were surveyed—entries, front desks, common rooms, TV and game rooms, lounges, study areas, meeting rooms, corridors, kitchens, laundry rooms, trash and recycling areas, and outdoor common areas. This provided not only an understanding of each area's particular role, but also information on how the location and proximity of different space types influenced their success.

The study team used a variety of research methods, including student focus groups, interviews with residential life staff, building tours, and analysis of floor plans. The discussions with students and staff were open ended but focused on these questions: How does the residence hall operate socially and what role do common spaces play? How well do the common spaces support residential life programming? Which spaces do you and your friends gravitate to most? Why do you like these spaces and what activities do you do in them? Which spaces do you like least and what about them turns you away?

The next step was to evaluate, and in some cases, quantify the characteristics of the most successful spaces—their location, size, openness, connection to the exterior, proximity to other building elements, lighting, materials, acoustics, furniture, and technology. An exact correlation between the measurable attributes of building spaces and the immeasurable expression of student satisfaction is not possible, but some key patterns emerged. Across the campuses we found that the most successful spaces shared the following attributes:

PROXIMITY, VISIBILITY, AND OPENNESS

Students want to see and be seen. Common areas that are open to, and visible from, the main entry and circulation route draw students in. Likewise, open spaces are far more likely to be active social spaces than closed rooms. Any level of barrier diminishes the likelihood that a student will enter the space and engage in activities. Where the room's function requires separation, glass walls or glass doors create the necessary acoustic privacy without compromising the connectivity. Nobody wants to be that person who opens a door to find that they have interrupted a private conversation. Closed or less visible spaces can also feel unsafe.

At one building where the meeting room is separated from the main entry by a large glass wall, students commented that they regularly decided to drop in for events that they hadn't planned on attending because they saw what was going on. At a 14-story tower, floor common spaces are directly visible from the doors of a recently added elevator, providing a direct view of social activities as elevator doors open and close. Students in this building noted a level of comfort with socializing on floors other than their own that was not observed in other buildings.

MULTIPLE ACTIVITIES IN ONE SPACE

Areas that combine several activities within a larger space attract different people and promote interaction across social groups. Students find it less intimidating to enter a space where many things are happening versus a space that only supports one activity. A room with a TV, pool table, and kitchen may not provide the optimal TV watching environment, but it will promote a more social TV watching experience.

For example, in one building, the team observed that a group had taken over the TV lounge for gaming. Other students indicated that they would never go into that room because they are not interesting in gaming and this was not their crowd. Similar comments were made about kitchens that had only occasional use because they were small and disconnected. In contrast, at a residence hall with a large multiactivity area next to the entry, students in the same space were playing pool, studying, cooking, and watching TV. They were talking from one group to the other, and there was no sense that the many activities were impinging on each other.

Some building spaces, such as laundry, vending, or recycling areas, are seen only as service spaces. They are, however, used every day and if well-designed and combined with other functions, they can be hubs of activity. One laundry room had expansive windows and a sliding door out to the patio. Another was open to the larger common space and separated from the adjacent pool table by a counter for folding clothes or studying. Why not have fun or at least get a little work done while washing your clothes?

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OPTIMALLY SIZED

Larger spaces provide a greater level of accommodation for activities, but more is not always better. Appropriately sized common areas are simultaneously compact enough to encourage interaction and generous enough to house a range of activities. Spaces that are too big for their purpose or undifferentiated feel empty when only a few people are around.

One example the team saw was an enclosed study lounge with three tables. If it was occupied by a group, it felt intrusive for others to come in, even though there were empty tables. This room was neither big enough for multiple groups nor small enough to dedicate to one activity at a time.

DISTRIBUTION AND VARIETY

Students form social connections and build a sense of community on a range of scales—with roommates, with floor mates, and with other house members. Residence halls with a variety of common areas distributed throughout the building maximize opportunities for social connection at these various scales. Multiple sizes and types of spaces are particularly important in large buildings and in towers, where the potential for an anonymous experience is heightened.

Likewise, the need for multiple spaces increases as the number of double-occupancy rooms increases. The team noted that many of the residence halls studied included spaces for one or two people within the corridors, such as a window seat or a single chair with a view at the far end of the hall. Students use these spaces for quiet study and intimate conversation. This arrangement is particularly prized by students who live in doubles as a place to simply be alone or have a private phone call. Unlike common areas with a social purpose, these work best when they are away from the action.

OWNERSHIP OF SPACE

A student's comfort level with his/her residence hall depends a great deal on the ability to personalize the surroundings, to "own" the space. It is this ability, particularly at the floor and suite level, that elevates housing from merely a place to live to a home. The team observed great examples of the ways that students take over common space for personal projects, rearrange furniture, decorate walls, and create social patterns that become the cultural norm for the building.

In some cases, this ownership desire is supported by designed elements, such as individual bulletin and marker boards next to each door. Sectionals and ottomans are easy to move and allow a variety of arrangements. One of the more interesting examples of making a place one's own was a washable marker board wall. One person had written a manifesto of sorts, someone else used the wall for math equations, and a third student had drawn a cityscape.

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QUALITY OF SPACE

Natural light, inviting color, and comfortable furniture create a welcoming setting. Students do not hang out in spaces that are poorly lit, outfitted with uncomfortable furniture, drafty, echoing, or otherwise physically unpleasant. Conversations, the most basic ingredient of social interaction, occur in settings with good acoustics and comfortable furniture. Students study in rooms with good lighting and appropriate technology. The most common negative remarks from students about older buildings focused on basic qualitative issues that are easy to address in the course of renovation projects.

Lighting schemes that combine daylight and hidden artificial light sources produce inviting atmospheres and excellent light levels. They highlight the architecture and emphasize activity areas. But student housing comes alive in the late afternoon and evening. One tends to design with daytime as the default condition, when, in fact, students spend more time in their residence halls at night. At night, the role of lighting goes beyond the interior. Well-lit lobbies and common areas glow at night and create a visible link to public areas as one approaches the building.

The study team found that many of the newer buildings emphasize warm color schemes and use materials such as drywall, wood, and stone that are more comfortable to touch and softer acoustically. Many of the older structures were designed on the premise that they needed to be maintenance free. Psychologically, this produces the opposite of the intended effect. Students feel less ownership of institutional spaces, such as those constructed with concrete block, and are more likely to behave in destructive ways. More homelike environments prompt a sense of pride and care from students.

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Color is more difficult to characterize since it is subject to personal taste and tends to date quickly. The best applications use color to articulate architectural features or create a mood for a particular room. More gratuitous application of color creates a chaotic atmosphere. Students particularly complained about the excessive color used in one of the renovated buildings, commenting that it felt like an elementary school.

FURNITURE

Comfortable, flexible, and appropriate furniture is a primary ingredient of well-used common areas. The team found many public common areas with little or no furniture; not surprisingly, students don't use unfurnished spaces. In large multiactivity spaces, furniture plays a significant role in defining different areas and promoting different ways for students to interact. Sectionals, upholstered chairs, café tables, bar-height counters and stools, built-in benches, and booth seating signal slightly different behaviors, allowing students to find a place that suits their mood and social style.

The most popular upholstered seating is movable, has deep seats, and projects a homelike atmosphere. For lounge spaces, students appreciate the ability to move furniture into different configurations, providing accommodation for a variety of activities and groups sizes and giving students a sense of ownership of the space. There is a preference for chairs versus couches, particularly in rooms such as TV rooms, so that students who don't know one another can sit together comfortably.

Designer furniture might look inviting, but if it is uncomfortable or perceived as too formal it will be used infrequently. Likewise, furniture arrangements that are inflexible or hard to move are less popular. Built-in furniture is hit or miss, depending on the comfort of the configuration and the location. Window seats and small upholstered nooks are particularly well-liked.

A few years have passed since the completion of the MSCBA Residential Common Space Study, and aside from changes in technology, the ingredients of a great common space remain the same. The recently renovated Van Meter Hall at the University of Massachusetts Amherst pictured in figures 1–6 was designed based on the study guidelines. Students’ comments about spaces and how they use them further validated the study’s concepts. They spread out art projects on the kitchen island, use the bay window seating for group meetings, and study in the laundry room. On any given evening, students are in every part of the main common space, engaging in all sorts of activities and, most importantly, talking with one another.

Figure 1 Van Meter Hall Common Space Floor Plans



Figure 2 **Van Meter Hall Multiactivity Space**



Figure 3 **Van Meter Hall Kitchen**



Figure 4 **Van Meter Hall Common Space: Multiple Activities with a Variety of Furniture**



Figure 5 **Van Meter Hall Common Space: Washable Marker Boards**



Figure 6 **Van Meter Hall Laundry**



So, design spaces that focus on students and how they interact. Create settings that support all parts of their lives—personal, social, and academic. Build common spaces with these ideas in mind and they will come.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Julia Nugent is a principal at HMFH Architects in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she leads the firm's Higher Education practice. Her work focuses on planning and design for student life facilities with an emphasis on how architecture can support academic success and student development. She is a faculty member of the Boston Architectural College and presents frequently on the topic of design for residential life.