



Striking the Balance of Public vs. Private Space in American College Residence Hall Design

History and Current Trends

Sam Olshin, FAIA
Atkin Olshin Schade Architects, Philadelphia, United States
sam.olshin@aosarchitects.com

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The design of American college and university residence halls has evolved significantly over time, reflecting broader changes in architecture, student demographics, and societal trends. In the 19th century, many residence halls emphasized Collegiate Gothic styles with monastic student rooms and grand, light-filled common spaces. Post-WWII dormitories, influenced by modernist principles, prioritized functionality with spartan interiors and limited student amenities. These designs often mirrored the era's inward-focused and anti-urban campus planning, shaped by social upheavals and evolving student demographics.

Today, residence halls serve as transitional spaces between home life and independent living, addressing diverse student needs. Contemporary designs focus on balancing privacy with community, incorporating flexible common areas, living-learning environments, and spaces promoting health and well-being. Sustainability has become a key consideration, with features like energy-efficient technologies, green roofs, and dashboard systems that encourage students to conserve resources. Advanced technology, including Wi-Fi, hybrid learning portals, and smart building access, integrates seamlessly into modern designs, enhancing both connectivity and security.

As colleges face economic pressures and shifting demographics, public-private partnerships (P3s) have become a viable solution for funding new developments. These trends reflect broader efforts to create residence halls that support diverse student populations, foster social engagement, and promote sustainability while addressing the challenges of privacy, inclusion, and environmental responsibility.

A Historical Perspective

The design of today's American college and university residence halls has evolved greatly from the college dormitory design of previous generations; not only has the planning and design terminology evolved, the entire concept of shared space for 18–22 year-olds has evolved as well. In the 19th century, residence hall design often reflected the overall prevailing architectural style of the campus and prioritized the buildings' contribution to the overall campus plan with centrally-sited and often formal structures defining campus edges, courtyards, and quads. While student rooms were relatively monastic and small, Common Rooms and adjacent Dining Halls were often spacious and light filled.¹



Figure 1: Interior of Student Room. Courtesy of Bryn Mawr College Photo Archives. <https://digital-collections.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/collections/bryn-mawr-college-photo-archives>

Cope & Stewardson's designs for new residence halls at the University of Pennsylvania (The Quadrangle, 1894–1929) and Bryn Mawr College (As seen in Figure 1– Radnor Hall, 1886–7; Denbigh Hall, 1889–91; Pembroke Hall, 1892–4; and Rockefeller Hall, 1900–1904) are resplendent in their Collegiate Gothic Style, complete with individual fireplaces and window seats along with generous study spaces and parlors. After World War II, an architectural design aesthetic based on modern design principles predominated. This aesthetic was focused more on the principles of the contemporary International Style and less based on specific context or site. Many residence halls from this era often had spartan interiors, narrow double-loaded corridors, utilitarian gang restrooms and showers, exposed painted concrete block walls, and minimal student amenities. Many college dormitories of the 1950's or 60's designed by noted modernist architects such as Eero Saarinen (Morse & Stiles at Yale University, 1957–1961, and Hill House – seen in Figures 2 & 3– at the University of Pennsylvania, 1958–1960), Alvar Aalto (Baker dormitory at MIT, 1946–48) and Louis Kahn (Erdman dormitory at Bryn Mawr College, 1960–65) to name a few – provided buildings with varied massing and facades, but with minimal internal variety of public vs. private space.

¹ Tolles 2011.



Figure 2: Exterior of Hill College House, designed by Eero Saarinen. Courtesy of UPenn Digital Archives. https://guides.library.upenn.edu/Digital_Archives

Figure 3: Student Room at Hill College House, designed by Eero Saarinen. Courtesy of UPenn Digital Archives. https://guides.library.upenn.edu/Digital_Archives

The residential units in these post-WWII dormitories typically had low ceilings with a standardization that generally precluded a variety of spaces. Further, these buildings were often inward focusing, with a general lack of engagement between spaces or at the pedestrian level. This planning parti often reflected an increasingly anti-urban trend on campuses that had become more inward focusing during this era. This trend was a response to a growing tide of social upheaval in America including the rise of civil rights movement, and increasing anti-Vietnam war protests on campus.²

During this period, the general demographic of students going to higher educational institutions was from a two-parent household, predominantly white and male, with that student usually attending a local or regional college.³ Fraternities often played a bigger role in students' social lives offering community activities as part of "Greek Life". Sororities too, offered similar attributes with organized dances and other social activities often miles away at corresponding all-male or all-female institutions.⁴

Today, most college and university Student Activity Centers or Campus Centers accommodate the majority of the campus-led community activity and social life on campus. However, the reconstituted and evolving residence halls have become both extensions of home life as well as transitional living centers to a post-graduation independent life. While there has also been a recent generational shift of post-college grads returning to live at home while job or career-searching, the search for post-graduation employment (and the fulfillment that goes with that independence) has become more competitive, more global, and seen as less than a search for a long-term career than as the search for experience that comes with a limited-term job opportunity. In this era of AI, often times the job security that once came with a long-term career has proved elusive.⁵

Recent Trends

Recently, much has been written about how smaller colleges have been either closing their doors or re-shuffling their academic programs to promote business majors and engineering majors at the expense of more liberal arts and languages programs; this cutting of programs has extended into intercollegiate athletics as well.⁶ This trend is representative of the economic realities of running modern higher education institutions as well as shifting demographics, rising costs, limited scholarship opportunities, and heightened competition amongst institutions.

² Schrecker 2021.

³ Snyder 1993.

⁴ Sasso 2018.

⁵ Fennessy 2017.

⁶ Hartocollis, 2023.



Some institutions have shifted the cost of building new residence halls to outside development firms (P3's) who take on the design, financing, construction, and often management of these residence halls as part of a long-term institutional ground lease in exchange for a commitment by the college that the residence hall will be fully occupied. While the college may have a reduced input in the design and layout of the resultant new residence hall in the P3 development scenario, the academic institutions do get to direct their financial resources to other on campus building types such as classrooms, labs, or athletic facilities.⁷

STUDENT CULTURE AND DESIGN FOR GEN Z

While there is no one size fits all model in residence hall architectural design and placemaking, young people studying and socializing in the nascent 21st c. have their own unique needs and aspirations. These goals must be reflected and addressed as part of contemporary residence hall planning and design. Creating organized space is a contextual exercise that needs to balance inspiring places to collaboratively learn and socialize – with more intimate and quiet spaces for studying, sleeping, and quiet reflection. Today's student living arrangements, be they P3 housing developments or the academic institution's own, include new living arrangements that reflect today's more diverse society, and advanced technology – issues that were not nearly as prevalent two generations ago.

We all have basic needs for shelter, community, and places to learn and socialize. One of the challenges for an architectural practice focusing on residence hall design is the need to create spaces that balance social and private spaces in ways that are exciting, interesting, welcoming, and comforting. In our research and experience, we have found a number of trends that we work to address in our residence hall design.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

In a post-COVID world, health and well-being has become one of the leading issues in student-centered architectural design. Between the stresses associated with remote learning, the lack of peer and mentor engagement during that pandemic period, and the daily stresses of academic effort, the need for spaces to unwind and decompress cannot be underestimated or overlooked. What is typically known as the "emerging adulthood" period can be a fraught time of adjustment meaning that providing spaces within residence halls that ensure safety, stability, and comfort are essential. This includes the design of spaces for privacy and quiet that ensure a good night's sleep, as well as informal spaces that connect students to both each other and their campus, as seen in Figure 4- a residence hall common space in Bryn Mawr College's New Dorm.

7 Fennessy 2017.



Figure 4: *New Dorm College common space with view of the historic campus, Bryn Mawr College. Photography by: Jeffery Totaro; Courtesy of Atkin Olshin Schade Architects.*

Spaces for social connection are also important allowing students to make friends and build connections with peers. Places like demonstration kitchens with ample seating encourage healthy and nutritious eating habits and offer places for shared meals and discussions. Shared laundry facilities, and indoor and outdoor study courtyards with flexible furnishings, offer similar places for incidental encounters and can serve as scheduled meet-up points as well. Overall, residence hall design must deliver experiences that ensure students can balance privacy with social engagement in ways that promote maturity, self-care, and well-being.⁸

PRIVACY

Many of today's incoming first-year students have never had to share a bedroom at home, and therefore have elevated expectations when looking for the college of their choice. While not everyone can get a private room as a first-year student, (nor is it even universally desired), many colleges set up future roommates well in advance using social media as a student matching and communication tool. The ubiquitous stacked bunk beds of a generation ago have typically given way to singles and doubles with lofted beds to accommodate dressers or desks. Similarly, the Men's and Women's restrooms that were historically down the hall from the dorm rooms, have generally evolved on many campuses to be gender-neutral shared restroom facilities. These often have full-height toilet or shower stalls ensuring privacy, and are across from a counter housing a row of common sinks. More often than not, especially in upper level student residence halls, one may also see full or semi-private bathrooms within 2, 3, or 4-bedroom suite residence hall units.

This trend towards privacy is a direct reflection of a more demanding and more af-

⁸ Barry and Hampton 2022

fluent society as well as the heightened competition among institutions catering to families more likely and able to pay full tuition and housing costs. Conversely, academic institutions have grown increasingly concerned that the perceived student privacy desire can also breed isolation, loneliness and depression – unwanted trends that have kept school counseling and Health Centers busy.⁹ Creating social spaces that are welcoming, flexible, and varied are a necessary counterpoint to the need for private space.

UNIT TYPE VARIETY

In order to meet rising student demand and current expectations, many residence halls offer choices with a variety of one-to-four-bedroom residential units within a building. This is a strategy that benefits both students and the college which is looking to distinguish itself with flexibility and innovation addressing current trends and demands. Many colleges and universities that focus on a liberal arts curriculum, accommodate students from a great variety of locales including both the United States and abroad. As a result, these institutions are often compelled to address DEI related issues – diversity, equity, and inclusion; learning to live with people that are not like yourself has become a highly politicized area of discussion that has affected student housing design. Accommodating “safe spaces” or bedrooms to house students’ emotional support animals has become an added challenge to residence hall design.¹⁰ Unit type variety offers alternatives to accommodate students of varying interests, needs, and means.

COMMON SPACES, SOCIAL SPACES, AND LIVING/LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Social space design continues to evolve as part of a residence hall’s overall design. Flexible and varied common space that fosters a sense of community is essential and serves as a counterpoint to more private domestic spaces. A focus on shared space and group amenities allows for informal settings for studying, group project development, and casual reading. Sometimes, especially in hybrid learning situations, these social or living/learning spaces within residence halls are better for college-level learning than are traditional academic settings. Collaborative spaces to gather have become the new social and community spaces within student residence hall settings. This includes laundry facilities, kitchens, and other common areas. They also often include spaces for outdoor gathering be they small areas with bistro tables and benches, or more formal spaces like tiered seating or amphitheaters for student events, as seen in the outdoor amphitheater at a new housing project at Lafayette College in Figure 5.

9 Alonso 2023.

10 Bauer-Wolf 2019.



Figure 5: McCartney Street Housing Project at Lafayette College, Amphitheater. Photography by: Jeffery Totaro; Courtesy of Atkin Olshin Schade Architects.

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Two generations ago, a payphone down the hall was the one technology that allowed students to communicate with their parents and the outside world. As recently as the 1980's having a telephone within each individual dorm room or suite was a major upgrade. Today, connective technology has a huge role on college campuses from full access Wi-Fi, flat screens, projectors, and printers within residence halls to "Smart Campus" technology.

Online portals throughout the academic institution allows for hybrid learning and remote access. Technology has also allowed for increased security on campus including building access. For the architect, accommodating technological upgrades has required a clear understanding and appreciation for balancing the importance of global connections and collaborative projects with the protection of privacy and the issues of isolation that can come with online study.¹¹

ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Academic institutions are being asked to be better advocates for environmental sustainability in everything they do. LEED certification as well as Energy Star and even Passive Haus certification as part of Living Building Challenge have become increasingly prevalent. Eco-friendly design may include what has become the general norm and include generally code mandated criteria such as motion sensors, low flow fixtures, recycled and recyclable materials and low VOC finishes. Sustainable design efforts have also included vegetated "green" roofs and solar panels. Renovations of existing residence halls can also boost a campus' sustainability practices by transforming an older building into a more modern, LEED Certified one (Figure 6).

¹¹ Walker 2024.



Figure 6: Stouffer Hall, University of Pennsylvania. LEED Silver Certified Renovation of an existing 1960s building that did not comply with any accessibility or energy efficiency standards. Photography by: Halkin Mason; Courtesy of Atkin Olshin Schade Architects.

Today's students are generally more interested in environmental issues and the impact of climate change on the environment than ever before. Residence hall design gives them a chance to understand the impact of climate change on their built-in environment. Traditionally, based on the academic calendar, residence hall design did not include air conditioning. Creating residence halls that address a hotter climate and the provision of comfortable spaces year-round – that can also be fossil-fuel free or carbon neutral – are additional challenges for the contemporary architect.

Students are also more interested in energy conservation and sustainable practices than ever before. Colleges and universities have adapted and understood that if they want to attract prospective and committed students, they need to have buildings and landscapes that follow sustainable design guidelines and practices. Appropriate responses can also save the institution in long-term energy costs. Some residence hall design efforts include dashboard technology in common spaces so students can challenge other residence halls on minimizing energy consumption.¹² These are opportunities not just to address energy consumption, but to also create opportunities for students to participate in shared and communal activities. Similarly, exterior improvements such as stormwater capture areas with native grasses and native plantings to address the heat island effect as part of climate change are often perfect places for outdoor gathering spaces and events.

12 Burke 2011.

PUBLIC/PRIVATE INTERFACE

Many of today's college and university housing developments and projects are at the campus edges as the academic buildings remain at the core surrounding traditional campus greens. Being on the campus perimeter means that the design professional must address customary town and gown interface issues. This typically means additional campus security, but it also means acoustic separation, privacy, and perhaps equally importantly – the development of shared amenities.

Community and shared social spaces can often be addressed at grade. Retail opportunities that include food and beverage, campus bookstores, boutiques, and similar facilities encourage interaction, street life, safety – and create a welcoming campus entry while providing shared amenities for students and neighbors alike. Spaces like these foster community and serve as transitional spaces for upper-level students as they achieve growing independence and learn to appreciate civic life and its associated responsibilities.

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