The Importance of Sense of Place and Sense of Self in Residence Hall Room Design

Stephanie A. Clemons       James H. Banning
David A. McKelfresh

Residence halls have been receiving additional attention in recent years as a means to support specific educational objectives. The dormitories of the past, which were perceived as simply places for students to sleep, are being transformed into integrated living-learning environments. New residential models have been explored that foster community, collegiality, communication, and interaction (Godshall, 2000).

The design of residence hall rooms has traditionally focused on functional aspects such as flexible furnishings and lighting issues. In the past, concepts such as sense of place and sense of self have received little attention. Sense of place is a theory that delves into feelings of belonging to an environment and security within it. Sense of self involves the use of symbols to communicate to others one’s personal underlying identity (Searing, 2000). Residence hall rooms can be designed to support students’ personalities and value systems, thereby fostering a sense of place and sense of self. Information identified may suggest new residential design policies with the goal of enhancing the retention of students in higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions have been examining and researching the design of interior spaces in their residence halls in an effort to improve their condition for over a decade. More recently, a renewed interest surfaced as the result of research that indicated student retention could be correlated to the quality of physical spaces on campus (Hansen & Altman, 1976). As a result, millions of dollars have been spent to remodel old dormitories or build new residence halls to attract and retain students. New residence hall models have been created to foster community, interaction, collegiality, and communication (Godshall, 2000). These models have focused primarily on the common spaces in the residence halls (Godshall).

A review of the literature indicates that there has been little attention given to the design and development of private spaces including residence hall rooms. New configurations of stand-alone singles, rooms shared by two or three, or suites of various sizes have been developed to offer incoming students flexibility and variety in their sleeping and private living spaces (Godshall, 2000). Any issues discussed in the literature seem to revolve around the functional aspects of the private interior spaces. Little literature can be located concerning how the concepts of sense of place and sense of self have been applied or discussed in relation to the design of residence hall rooms, shared or private. Sense of place refers to feelings of belonging to an environment and security within it. Sense of self involves the use of symbols to communicate to others one’s personal identity (Searing, 2000). Although exploratory in nature, the impact of these concepts may inspire designs for residence hall rooms.

Background

In the mid-1980s, colleges and universities faced declining enrollments. As a result, institutions of higher education were competing for a shrinking student population (D’Apice, 1994). The majority of residential buildings on college campuses, constructed in the late 1950s and 1960s, were designed with large community bathrooms and small residential rooms accommodating only two students (Corbett, 1973). This type of communal living was outdated and did not reflect the current student populace. After conducting research, colleges in the late 1980s began making significant changes in residence hall living accommodations.

Literature indicates that several dilemmas existed with the general design of residence hall rooms. First, due to the requirement at many institutions for first-year students to live in the residence halls, overcrowding became a problem. In fact, over two-thirds of students entering four-year institutions lived in residence halls (Boyer, 1987). Second, many incoming first-year students were moving into a smaller space
than they were accustomed to in their family home. Most bedrooms in American middle-class residences average about 90 square feet (8.1 square meters). Most residence hall rooms are approximately the same size but are occupied by two individuals rather than one (Wilson & Banning, 1993). Third, privacy is dramatically reduced when sharing a bedroom. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 1990 that sharing a bedroom in the family home had decreased from 16% in 1950 to 4% in 1990 (Wilson & Banning). Fourth, students arrive on campus with twice as many personal items as their predecessors, yet storage space has not increased in residence hall rooms (Donnelly, 1992). Fifth, year-round use of residence hall facilities and furnishings requires built-in flexibility to accommodate student and non-student use (Thompson, 1996). Traditional students, 18-23 years of age, appear to be seeking greater privacy, larger spaces, and increased control over their personal space (Banning, 1995). Therefore, the residence hall requires more flexibility to accommodate the changing student body and the desired feeling of home.

Between 40 and 45 of every 100 first-time students do not end up earning a degree of any sort (Tinto, 1985). Retention research emphasizes the importance of the interaction between students and the campus environment (Banning, 1984). The degree of fit or sense of belonging may determine the likelihood of students remaining at the institution (Beal & Noel, 1980). Astin (1977) noted that student satisfaction with campus housing is a critical factor of success and retention in the campus environment. Researchers agree that residence hall living plays a vital role in the social and academic success of college students (Astin, Green, & Korn, 1984; Chickering, 1974). Therefore, time spent to analyze the effectiveness of residence hall rooms by college administrators is worth the effort.

**Status of Residence Hall Room Design**

Many institutions have spent millions of dollars retrofitting, refurbishing, and redesigning the interior spaces to respond to changing student needs. College students of the Millennial generation who entered college since the year 2000 are consumers who need the freedom to control aspects of their surroundings and feel their living quarters are not merely a static environment to inhabit between classes (Reynolds, 2001). This notion of empowering students in their living space seems to be a newer trend in residential hall rooms.

College administrators and architects have made many specific recommendations concerning the design of residence hall rooms. Case studies reported from campuses around the country have detailed the steps taken to retain the architectural and historic integrity of the residence hall building while redesigning the interior spaces (Pocorobba, 2001; Reynolds, 2001). One set of recommendations regarding room design involves the reconfiguration of the interior spaces themselves. These include redesigning the traditional-style residence hall rooms into apartments and suite-style living arrangements (Godshall, 2000). In addition, new living options were integrated into existing facilities to make them more attractive to certain student populations, such as thematic housing, coeducational housing, living-learning centers, and co-op housing (Anchors, 1996; Biddison & Hier, 1994).

A second set of recommendations deals with equipment, furnishings, finishes, and fixtures in the residence hall rooms. Thompson (1996) offers the following recommendations:

- Flexible, versatile bed system specified with safety side rails (easy adjustment to multiple heights, meets ADA requirements, and can be safely lofted)
- Increased size of desk tops for more surface use
- Supported technology needs in personal space
- Dressers modified to maximize vertical space
- Computer and storage security issues addressed
- Residential atmosphere enhanced
- Multiple furniture configurations made available

Heilweil (1973) indicated that room furniture is the single most important factor in the student’s room and is perhaps the least understood. D’Apice (1994) added to the list and suggested:

- Cover concrete walls with upscale, fire retardant materials to enhance the environment visually and absorb sound
- Use lamps rather than overhead institutional lighting
Use industrial-grade (but attractive) carpeting, thereby replacing the once-exclusive use of linoleum.

Biddison & Hier (1994) also suggested:
- Carefully chosen color palette applied to walls and floors
- Textured patterns on the floor to introduce warmth into the environment
- Mobile file pedestals
- Closet storage systems
- One-inch blinds to create uniform look on exterior of building
- Wall hung shelves to save on floor space
- Contemporary lighting solutions, such as track and recessed fixtures to cut down on energy costs

More recently, Reynolds (2001) added to the list of recommendations by suggesting:
- Stackable, movable beds and bookshelves
- Wider and deeper desks to comfortably allow room for computer monitors and other items
- Individual heating and air conditioning units for control over temperature in environment
- Wider doorways

Articles published over the past decades have highlighted functional, aesthetic, and personalization factors that may enhance an interior space on campus. Functional factors of a quality interior space can include those items that give an individual a perception of control over the space and enhance the function of an event or activity. These factors include the ability to induce relaxation and enhance creativity (McCoy & Evans, 2002), use of day lighting (Butler & Steuerwald, 1991; Kim, 1998), privacy, and physical comfort. Aesthetic factors include those that relate to perceived beauty and personal well-being (Ritterfeld & Cupchik, 1996). Personalization factors include establishment of status, depiction of family in the space, identity, and a home-like environment (Thompson, Robinson, Graff, & Ingenmey, 1991).

Students are demanding more in the way of creature comforts. These creature comforts involve requests for privacy, better lighting, increased power and data connections, individual control of heating systems, and closer proximity to services such as dining, retail, and mail services (Pocorobba, 2001). The challenge for housing administrators seems to be common institutional problems related to non-flexible structural systems, lack of fire protection and security systems, non-flexible physical layouts, and poor performing building envelopes including windows, doors, and roofs (Pocorobba).

What is interesting in this glance at residence hall room design is administrators’ reported lack of interest in support of an individual student need such as the personalization of space. Only one or two articles briefly mentioned the need to support this value. Little attention in the literature has been given to enhancing the students’ sense of belonging in their personal, private space on campus: the residence hall room.

**Sense of Place and Sense of Self in the Home**

Every aspect of the environment carries symbolic meaning that may affect the individual (Venolia, 1988). Forms, shapes, styles, materials, lighting, colors, and spatial configurations all portray meaning (Miller & Schlitt, 1985). Environmental psychologists have studied this phenomenon of meaning in terms of appropriation, attachment, and identity (Altman & Werner). Place attachment and place identity suggest that a bond develops between people and objects or spaces when people attach psychological, social, and cultural significance to them (Altman & Werner). No matter what the space is, an individual adds a personal touch to it, therefore personalizing it (Marcus, 1995). Consciously or unconsciously, individuals portray information about themselves in their homes through personalization of space. An individual’s unique identity is established through personalization of space, which is critical to overall development of self (Baillie & Goeters, 1997). Having a home where dwellers feel secure, self-aware, expressive, and connected with life enhances their health and well-being (Venolia, 1988). Personalization is the human way of adapting to the environment (Kron, 1983).

The home is an environment that can exhibit a sense of place for the dweller. Hiss (1990) described a sense of place as the theory of belonging to an environment and feeling secure within it. Sense of place may also refer to the experience of a person in a particular place or how he or she feels about the place (Steele,
For example, it is critical that elderly persons have artifacts that symbolize memories and a sense of place about where they have been or where they are when moving into a nursing home (Boschetti, 1995). If they do not feel a sense of place, they may give up on life, not feeling an identity with a place.

Home also represents an important sense of self or identity; it is an experience in which one feels connected to the place, people involved, and memories that occurred in that environment (Altman & Werner, 1985). Sense of self involves the use of symbols to communicate to others one’s personal underlying identity. The home is a symbolic environment that fulfills many needs. It is a “place of self-expression, a vessel of memories, a refuge from the outside world, a cocoon where we can feel nurtured and let down our guard” (Marcus, 1995, p. 4). A house is a home only when the inhabitants have control over the space (Kron, 1983). The home’s interior reflects how individuals view themselves (Cooper, 1974).

Through the use of symbols, feelings and attitudes can be conveyed and emotions can be communicated. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that objects embody problematic needs, feelings, or ideas and have an important place in the Freudian, or unconscious, view of the human experience. In trying to define self, people turn to symbols, things that are meaningful to them, to describe who they are in a physical, concrete way. Possessions convey meaning and transform an anonymous space into a place (Boschetti, 1995).

**Importance of Sense of Place and Sense of Self in Residence Hall Rooms**

Can concepts of sense of place and sense of self in the home be transferred to the sense of place and sense of self in residence hall rooms? In part, it seems probable. A study concerning personalization, a factor of sense of place and sense of self, was conducted at the University of Utah in the mid-1970s. Hansen and Altman (1976) were interested in analyzing how college students personalized their dormitory rooms. They hypothesized that for the majority of first-year students, dormitory living is probably a new experience. It is devoid of immediate parental presence and a place where they can more or less freely impose their own values on the environment.

As researchers, Hansen and Altman (1976) had the unique opportunity to see how students place their personal stamp on their physical environment. To assess personalization, photographs were taken of walls above the subject’s bed. Certain areas were omitted from the study, such as shelves, desks, and other items. The results of this study indicated that those students who personalized their dorm rooms early and whose decorations covered a large area of their walls had higher grade point averages and lower university dropout rates than students who did not personalize their rooms to any extent. Interestingly, a relatively high proportion of students did some decorating within the first two weeks of coming to the university (88%); thus reinforcing the belief that personalizing was a rapid and near-universal process. However, students who ended up dropping out of college decorated more with photos of family and partners perhaps reflecting loneliness and ties with home that were not balanced with memorabilia of their college life (Hansen & Altman). The limitation in this study is that it relates to only two-dimensional pictures/posters over a student’s bed and does not take into account other types of three-dimensional memorabilia that can act as symbols of self in an interior space.

A more recent study conducted by Wilson and Banning (1993) assessed the phenomenon of home to residence hall as an ecological transition. They asked 345 students to complete a survey describing their furnishings at home. Eighty-five percent of the students indicated that they were able to decorate their room most of the time.

Attachment of sense of self to smaller elements of the physical environment has crucial implications for developing a sense of place in the college residential setting. As Boschetti (1995) indicated, “Because possessions are small, tangible, and portable, they represent pieces of the environment over which the person has the most control” (p. 10). It is important for students to transform a new space into a place with meaning. Symbols act as strong supports for maintenance of psychological well being. “It is this role of possessions, to convey meaning and to transform an anonymous space into a place, that is crucial for [designers] to grasp when making decisions concerning interior spaces…” (p. 10).
Discussion & Summary

The residence hall challenge is to provide a marketable housing facility with a comfortable environment. The environment should be one that meets the greatest percentage of student needs, yet stays within an acceptable budget, and one that attracts the new student but retains the upper-class student (Thompson, 1996). However, based on the few studies that have been conducted relating to personalization and sense of place, it can be hypothesized that a sense of belonging can be heightened if the design of residence hall rooms can enhance sense of place and sense of self for the inhabitants. Moreover, Marcus (1992) suggests that institutional rules that severely limit personalization of the space “can be serious inhibitors of self-expression in the physical environment, and thus [inhibitors] of a positive sense of self-identity” (p. 88).

Bott, Wells, Haas, Lakey, and Banning (2003) commented, “Environments that offer solace in their authenticity, quality, beauty, uniqueness, and appropriateness of development often serve as a refuge from the pressures of modern-day society” (p. 2). Stress on students, and particularly on incoming first-year students, can be significant. When inhabitants are granted the autonomy to personalize their space, residence hall rooms can offer a place of solace and refuge. More time and attention needs to be given to the concepts of sense of place and sense of self within private interior spaces that act as home.

References


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*Stephanie Clemons is an Associate Professor of Design and Merchandising at Colorado State University*

*James H. Banning is a Professor of Education at Colorado State University*

*David McKelfresh is the Director of Staff Training and Assessment for Housing and Dining Services and also serves as an Assistant Professor for the Student Affairs in Higher Education Program*