

The Examined Life:

Creating campus buildings that enhance student life

By **Chris Purdy and Mark McVay**,
SmithGroup

When designing centers for student use, it is no longer enough to include a food court and a computer lab. Today's students are more tech-savvy, more connected and more collaborative than ever, and use their time in fundamentally different ways than students of the 20th century. They also display higher levels of social engagement and responsibility. If they had a manifesto, it might well be Socrates' "The unexamined life is not worth living," and they live this mantra as they update their profile status, choose free-time activities, and decide where to study or eat. Unsurprisingly, these students expect their colleges and universities to mirror and enable such traits on campus.

One of the most immediate ways that universities can accommodate the new student body is to give it the right kind of home. Examining the purpose, structure and end-use of residence halls and student centers, in our experience, makes all the difference when it comes to students' relationship with their university.

How, then, can buildings capitalize on this change to allow for connections and increased learning? How can architecture adapt to the needs and changes in technology? We've assembled a few case studies that demonstrate how good design and construction can improve students' lives, enable their increased connectivity, and support new styles of learning and engagement.

"Stalking" Students

At Pomona College in the late 1990s, a very handsome and high quality campus center went up to accolades from architects and designers, only to be actively avoided by students. The complex, which cost \$18.3 million, offered a courtyard, a luxurious dining facility and a game room, but students would go out of their way to walk around the building, not even cutting through it to shorten their route. Neil Gerard, the building's director, told *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2008, "We had a beautiful building, but not a very functional campus center."

SmithGroup was brought in to give the building what it needed to make it useful for students, and our first job was to ask them what had gone wrong. Rather than merely conducting surveys, we found students where they lived: the Motley, a hangout spot at a nearby campus, where they brought their own microwaved food to eat while they socialized over conversation or acoustic guitar performances and worked on projects with each other. We also organized a 48-hour observation of the Center and compared it with similar observations of more thriving parts of campus, and all this research became the foundation for the renovation.

But even then we weren't ready to build. First, the design team generated three concept designs and held



At Pomona College, students got what they wanted in a campus center: a "living room" with comfy furniture, cheerful lighting and an open feeling.

a campus-wide presentation for the student body. More than 100 students told us what they thought in small focus groups, making it possible to have high levels of discussion over what they wanted (bright, cheery places to relax; casual environments) and how to make that happen in the building.

We emerged from all this research with three main goals:

- We wanted to create a new campus “living room” with a fireplace, media center and quiet reading nooks. It was important that this space feel vibrant, so we also decided to place the mailroom at one end of the living room, which would ensure lots of foot traffic and make errands to the mailbox more enjoyable for students.
- We would combine a student-run coffee shop with the game room to make a recreational corridor and attract students looking for a study break.
- We needed to finish the basement, and because it was underground, we decided a pub-style social room with a moveable stage and one wall outfitted with an LED display that can turn the place into a nightclub.

We were dedicated to improving the building as fast as possible, so we fast-tracked construction, finishing all the renovations in one summer. Each space was outfitted with comfy furniture, cheerful lighting and glazed doors to make rooms feel open and

flexible. Now, the Center allows for students to use the building as they like, and it could hardly be more popular: students have to be kicked out at closing time.

What we learned sounds more straightforward than it really is. While the previous team had conducted student surveys, our key to success was keeping students engaged from initial concepts to reviews of construction mockups – from dream to reality. It was important to give the students the right guidance but it was just as important to know when to step out of the room and let them talk amongst themselves. So, we got a much better result through a combination of watching them in their preferred hang-out spots and showing them versions of what the building could look like.

More importantly, we found that the redesign became a lot more than a vanity project. Students adopted the building so fast that even we were surprised. The **Campus Center** became an essential feature of their day, and a place for them to connect to each other and the university.

Needs vary according to region and the type of university in question. While redesigning the public spaces at a residential building at Michigan State University, we found that the facility had a large population of international students who either couldn't or wouldn't eat the food available at the dining hall, but hadn't been provided any other options. As part of the renovation, we included a large community kitchen in the common part of building, so those students could prepare their own food. It was a direct response to students who had previously been ignored, and the kitchen has since become both a popular dining spot and a showcase for the university.

Staying Loose

As internet natives, today's students find the novelty of technology less impressive than whatever opportunities it provides. When one platform for finding information, entertainment, or personal connection fails, they move on to a new one. Friendster gave way to MySpace, which has given way to Facebook. However, old communication methods hold up: students still order magazines and books, and you can still find cheap furniture or rides on campus bulletin boards. Therefore, success lies in creating adaptable hubs that can keep up with ever-changing needs and offer as many options as possible.

We created such a hub at **Michigan State University's Owen Hall**, a residence building for graduate students. In the general entry, there are email stations for students to check for messages between classes and video

displays for university-wide updates. We also included printed media like local newspapers and flyers, and the students' mailboxes are nearby. This set-up allows them to be connected at all times, something they have learned to expect and value.

But we didn't stop there. Because MSU clearly recognizes the importance of fostering social interaction between students, we designed Owen Hall for social gathering as well. Like at Pomona College's Campus Center, we blurred the lines between living, eating, and entertaining areas. The farthest thing from static, pre-determined rooms, spaces can be custom-

ized on the fly. Hence, the day's dining hall becomes a study space at night, with incorporated wireless technology and power stations. The lounge area that was stagnant before is now an extension of the dining area, adjacent to a coffee shop, which makes it the living room of the building, with plenty of food for students to keep themselves charged. We also included small study nooks for groups of 4-5 students. All these areas are open 24 hours a day. As individual students pass through and interests change, so will Owen Hall, without much intervention on the part of the university.

Making room for social technology has an impact on pedagogy, too. Wherever two or more students gather around a monitor, keyboard or handset and interact over an idea, there's an added experiential dimension to learning that will last longer than any memorized fact, because it's stored in the mind as an event rather than simply a piece of data. Designing classrooms for this kind of learning is as important as designing social or recreational spaces.

Owen Hall has one place we didn't renovate for maximum sociability: the individual rooms of the students themselves. Today's students are often possessive of their own space, so personal bathrooms and living areas are preferred, and we made sure that once students left the common areas, they were able to have their privacy. Most of the rooms are singles.

Finally, we made sure the aesthetics were as appealing as the concept. Owen Hall has plenty of daylighting, both for energy savings and greater transparency. All this light reveals bright colors and clean lines that imitate the modern architecture of the outside.



Flexibility was designed into Michigan State University's Owen Hall, where the dining hall later becomes a study space, complete with wireless technology and 24-hour accessibility.

Fostering Change

Multiple studies, like those conducted by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), and National Wildlife Federation (NWF) have shown that student enthusiasm for sustainability and social responsibility is at an all-time high. Nowadays, many students choose colleges based on their commitment to reducing pollution and energy use.

So, we designed **Taylor Place**—a new dorm for 1,200 Arizona State University students in the heart of Phoenix – for sustainability from the ground up:

- The dorm is placed near Phoenix’s light-rail system, which makes movement between the Downtown and the Tempe campus

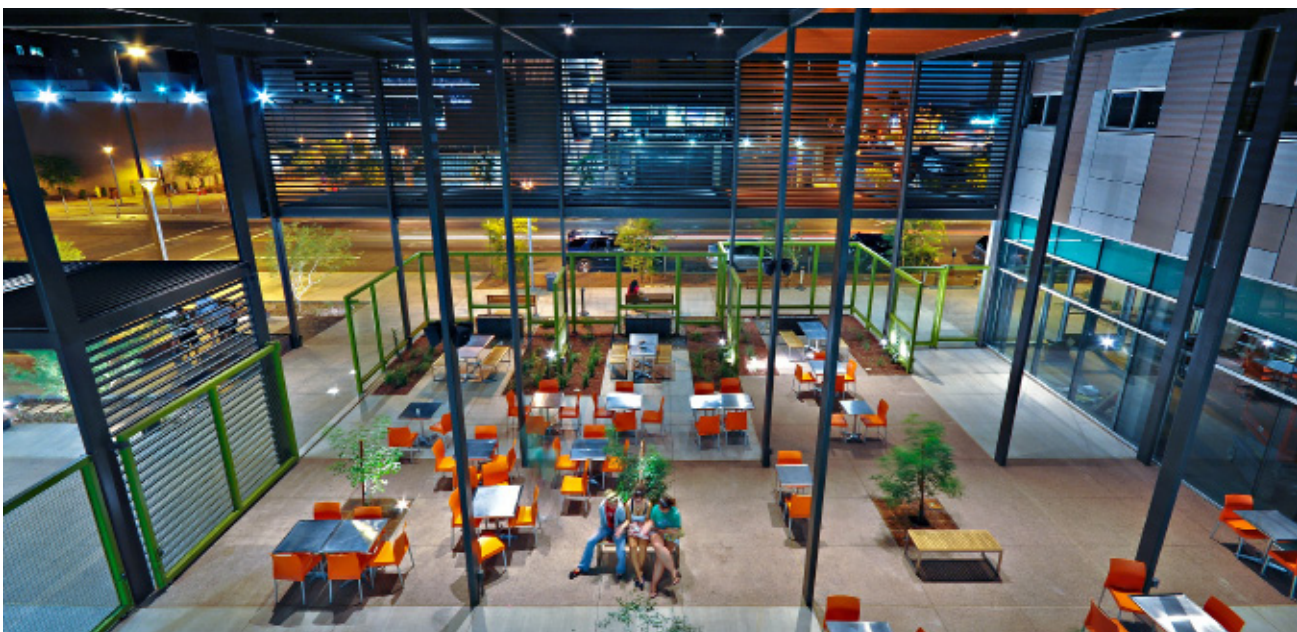
easier for students, without adding large parking lots that add to urban heat islands and increase energy consumption.

- We maximized natural daylight by siting the two buildings along an east-west axis and shading southern exposures from the fierce desert light.
- Water scarcity is a constant concern in the West, so we installed low-flow faucets and devices that capture water condensate from the ventilation system.
- Even the landscaping is sensitive to its environment: Taylor Place is surrounded by native, drought-tolerant plants that rarely need to be watered, and a trellis system helps to shade the sidewalks.

Although these things are good for the environment, they also strengthen ties between the community and the university: something that students

Sustainability and energy efficiency have well-documented paybacks for universities. While we were designing a large dorm for Arizona State University in drought-prone Phoenix, we carefully evaluated our options for fixtures to save both water and money. Those we selected for the showers and dual flush toilets will save 33% and 37% respectively over the water used with standard fixtures.

crave. By living and learning right in the middle of a lively pedestrian neighborhood, students travel less, consume less and become more connected to their immediate surroundings. As with Pomona and Michigan State, ASU’s Taylor Place accommodates high levels of interactivity with and between students who are used to imagining the world as a big place they have a responsibility to improve.



The urban shade garden at ASU’s Taylor Place is a place where students can eat, wait for class to start, study or simply hang out.

Pressing Forward

Designs will change, methods will improve. This generation will give way to another, and we'll learn how to build for that one, too. We realized when breaking these examples out that we might give the impression that Owen Hall at MSU might be less sustainable than ASU's Taylor Place, or that Pomona doesn't have the technology chops of Michigan State. This isn't the case. Rather, as we designed all three, we saw the same patterns repeating themselves: that students, as the primary users of any facility, need to be the main sources for designers, architects, and campus administrators. And this generation of students is unlike any previous in its interactivity, its focus on collaboration, and its connection to the world around it. Why not build a home for them?



Mark McVay, LEED AP is a principal and design director at SmithGroup's Los Angeles office. A registered architect and educator, he is recognized for creating student-focused learning environments. His clients include University of California campuses at Los Angeles and San Diego, University of Southern California, Pomona College and Los Angeles Community College District. Email him at:

mark.mcvay@smithgroup.com

Chris Purdy, AIA, LEED AP is a principal at SmithGroup and leads the Learning Practice at the firm's Detroit office. With more than 20 years of experience in the higher education market, his clients include Michigan State University, Central Michigan University and Oakland University. Email him at:

chris.purdy@smithgroup.com

Both Purdy and McVay are members of SmithGroup's collaborative Learning National Practice, a group of higher education design and planning leaders representing SmithGroup's 10 U.S. offices.