

The Renovation of East Campus: Control and Culture

by

Hugh T. Ebdy

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Signature of Author: _____

Department of Architecture
May 6, 2022

Certified by: _____

Susanne Schindler
Lecturer
Thesis Co-advisor

Certified by: _____

Nicholas de Monchaux
Professor of Architecture
Head, Department of Architecture
Thesis Co-advisor

Accepted by: _____

Leslie K. Norford
Professor of Building Technology
Chair, Department Committee on Graduate Students Committee

THESIS COMMITTEE

Thesis Co-advisors

Susanne Schindler, Ph.D.
Lecturer

Nicholas de Monchaux, MArch
Professor of Architecture
Head, Department of Architecture

Thesis Reader

Eden Medina, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Science, Technology, and Society
Thesis Reader

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Hugh T. Ebdy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the tension between university administrators' goals for their capital projects and the goals of end users, their students. These goals often diverge, given that universities must make decades-long financial decisions, while students' experiences can be seen as more fleeting. This thesis investigates this tension and what it means for planning processes and architectural design.

The research and analysis center on East Campus, the second oldest dormitory at MIT which opened in 1924. East Campus houses an active student culture based on self-governance, individualism, and privacy, and as the birthplace of hacking it is strongly tied to the wider public identity of MIT and how MIT is promoted to new students. As part of the MIT 2030 capital projects plan, East Campus was marked for renovation to bring it in line with contemporary living and accessibility standards, with construction originally slated to begin in the summer of 2022. However, given differences between MIT administrators and users in approach to undergraduate life, the author believes the renovation may spell the end of East Campus' unique student culture.

The author graphically and textually documents the early strategic and design stages of renovation, drawing on his experience as a resident advisor, discussions with students, staff, and consultants, and a seat on the renovation's student/staff committee. The analysis of MIT's functioning at the institutional level, its user engagement, as well as its conception of residential buildings reveals how certain processes may have negatively impacted the renovation's potential.

The author argues that a more ambitious design-led tone should be set before strategic options are agreed upon. He tests a set of interactive design games with users at the room, hall, and dormitory scales to gain a deeper understanding of how the East Campus community navigates space. The author translates these findings into an architectural proposal that emphasizes robustness as both a driver of sustainability and enabler of cultural communication. The thesis intends to re-center design in future MIT-led residential projects, which must balance user input, culture, budgetary demands, and donors.

Thesis Co-advisors:

Susanne Schindler, Lecturer

Nicholas de Monchaux, Professor of Architecture, Head, Department of Architecture

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1. INTRODUCTION

When undergraduate students arrive at university for the very first time, for many this moment is essential to how they begin to define themselves as part of a wider society. It is in this light that the other half of the university experience - student culture and student life - is arguably as important to the development of a student as their academics. Particularly within universities which house their students for the duration of their program, student life must provide an antidote to the cushioned bubble of academics by providing as accurate a stand-in for real-world experience as possible. This way, when students finally finish their degrees, they are both intellectually capable as well as mature, engaged members of society.



Fig. 1: Student Anti-War Protests at MIT, 1967-1972

How might a university achieve such a balance? Of all the places where undergraduate students spend their time while at university, the dormitory or living group likely has the largest impact on their experience outside of their academics. It is here that students spend a large portion of their day outside of class, here that they begin to define themselves amongst others from not-before-encountered backgrounds, where they may learn to cook and clean for themselves (or eat within a dining hall), find close friends (or become isolated), form relationships (or not), navigate the realities of shared living space and encounter extreme differences of opinion, and learn what it means to develop a new sense of home outside of their family unit.

It stands to reason that curating and investing in dormitories to enable and encourage these interactions and activities would then return the benefit of more culturally aware, mature, and socially engaged students who would go on to enrich the university community.

2. UNIVERSITY DECISION-MAKING

In 2021, UC Santa Barbara announced - to extensive criticism - plans for an 11-story dormitory that would house up to 4,500 students. The building was conceived of by billionaire Charles Munger, who donated \$200m to UC Santa Barbara for the project on the condition that they follow his plans for the dormitory to the letter. The reason for the criticism is that 94 percent of rooms would not have windows.



Fig. 2: UC Santa Barbara, Charles Munger Hall, Exterior

How did this happen? Well, in a project like this there are always many stakeholders involved but specifically the university was facing a strong pressure to fulfil a housing shortage. A university, like any institution, prioritises self-preservation and sometimes the only option a university can feasibly see itself make is to accept \$200m from a donor and then construct a dorm with no windows.

Like UCSB, MIT has also faced challenges with its housing stock - including a history of deferred maintenance across campus because of limited fundraising availability. This means a number of its older dormitories are now in poor condition and subsequently require intensive renovations.

The renovations of these dormitories fall under MIT's 2030 Capital Projects plan. This is an ongoing effort to overhaul and invest in various parts of campus infrastructure. There have been a number of undergraduate housing projects already addressed via the plan, including the renovation of New House and Burton Connor, the demolition of Bexley, as well as the introduction of New Vassar. It was deemed that EC would be the next project on the list and it was understood that a renovation of the building would be the best move.

The handling of student residences has by no means been an easy process for either MIT or its students. Unlike many other universities MIT allows students to select which dormitory or living group they enter, as well as the ability to move around throughout their schooling. This means that

student living groups at MIT have generally formed unique, idiosyncratic identities as opposed to the more homogenous living situation found at universities where students have no choice of accommodation. Living communities at MIT are therefore far more protective of their identities and alert to any changes imposed upon them. Looking at the conflicts that have arisen in recent years - protests against meal plans, the controversy surrounding the closure of Senior House and the demolition of Bexley, or the agreements made on the design of New Vassar which were later discarded - it is clear that there are differences between MIT and its students in what each view as priorities for its dormitories.



Fig. 3: Senior House protest, Lobby 7, MIT

It should be acknowledged that MIT does in fact give students a platform to speak their thoughts on such subjects where in other universities students may not have one, however that does not mean that MIT can rest on its laurels in this regard. The unintentional harm from these conflicts at MIT is really the by-product of the messy banality of bureaucracy and risk avoidance which heavily favours institutional goals over the goals of individual students or communities. These stories appear to fit a growing trend within American universities towards homogenisation and corporatisation (Dreyfuss, 2017).

In particular, these conflicts at MIT have been felt most keenly by what is referred to as the East Side; a loose collection of counter-culture dormitories and living groups that have shared similar ideals around freedom, individualism, and privacy. These were Senior House, East Campus, Pika, Random, Bexley, and tEp. However, with the closure of Senior House and Bexley, only four remain and the sentiment from students is that MIT administration is regarding these remaining four closely, especially the two on-campus dormitories; EC and Random.

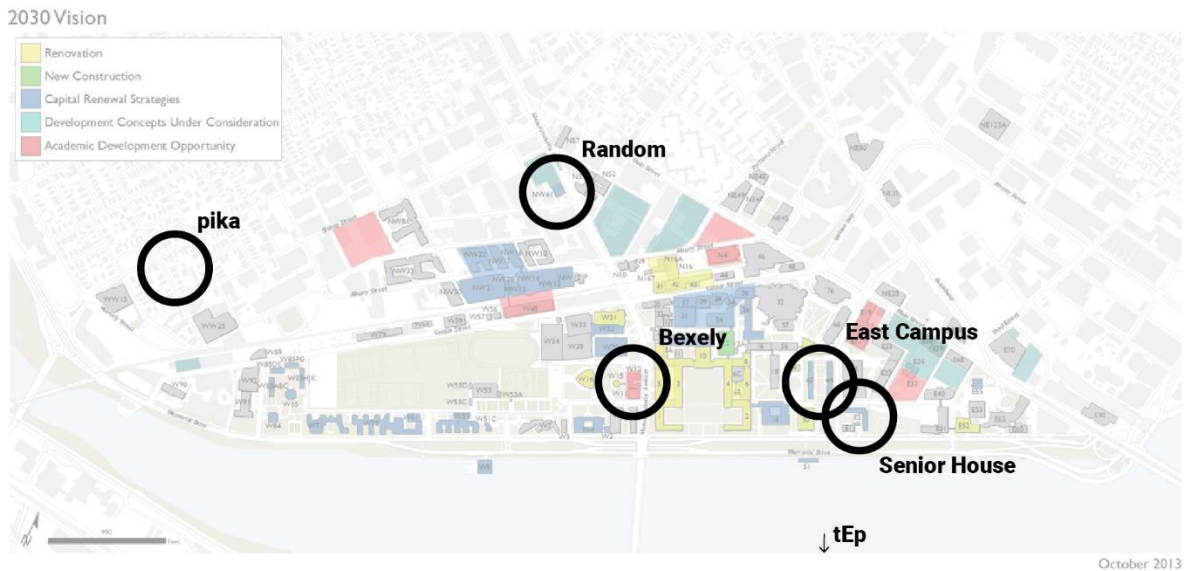


Fig. 4: 'East Side' dormitories and living groups within MIT's 2030 Capital Plan

What is perhaps curious is that - from what I can gather - MIT admissions actively promote East Side culture in order to sell the idea that this is not only a place of rigorous academics, but as a place of unique, multifaceted cultures and exploration. Ironically, at the time of writing, a picture from Senior House was used on MIT's current Campus Preview Weekend page, despite the dorm having been shut down a few years ago.



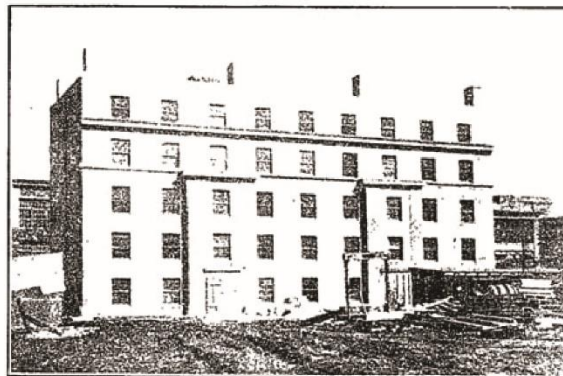
Fig. 5: East Campus Interior, Shared Hall Space

3. EAST CAMPUS

Melissa Nobles, MIT's new chancellor, has said of the university that it exists to "teach the whole student". "At MIT," she says; "you shouldn't hide your interests. 'Be your whole self'" (Dizikes, 2021). To that I say; look to East Campus (EC). Of the living groups on MIT's campus, my experience here has led me to believe that EC holds a particularly unique place even amongst universities across the US. In part because of the strong commitment to freedom of individual expression, ownership of space, emphasis on student responsibility, its physical manifestations of creativity, its long history of storytelling and traditions, strong sense of identity, and the fact that is a majority queer dorm and so provides this safe, critical space for self-exploration.

Like other student cultures with strong identities and those which gently (or otherwise) push back at regulation, the success of EC is predicated on a delicate balance between student freedom and administrative oversight. In that context, the renovation of EC presents to MIT a very real opportunity to take a strong public stance on what it means to provide a space like this that is so incredibly valuable for "teaching the whole student".

I will first take a quick look at East Campus in particular and see how it came about. The dormitory is the second oldest on campus. It was a number of administrators at the time that had the vision of bringing more students together in order to promote exactly this: development of student culture and relations outside of their purely academic tuition (Ben-David, 2014).



THE '93 UNIT—New Dormitory As It Is Today

Fig. 6: East Campus in its original manifestation in 1924

MIT at that time did not have the money to put towards the project, however the very first part of East Campus - which is now Bemis - was financed because of the excitement for this new venture amongst a set of alumni from the class of 1893, who then donated the funds.

The plan was for East Campus to be a practical, robust, and technologically advanced building that would enable student passions. For example, burlap was used to reinforce the walls so that students could customise their space and telephone lines were placed in all rooms. Once the first portion had been built, enthusiasm spread through other alumni groups, which allowed for the expansion to the full dormitory that exists today.

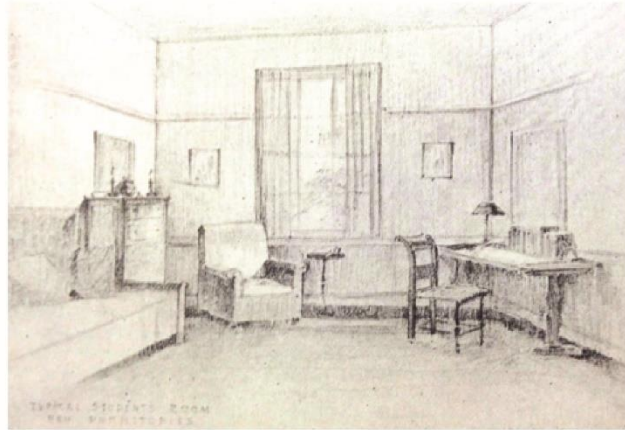


Fig. 7: Sketch of a typical early East Campus dorm room

In basic terms; the project led with ambition that generated excitement, that excitement generated funding, and that funding allowed for an experimental and appropriate dormitory.

EC has also always been tied to hacking; ever since the first set of students moved into the dormitory almost a hundred years ago the concept of ingenious pranks was given a formal cultural definition at EC that it had not elsewhere in the country. This spirit of adventure, combined with a light touch from administration and a robust building that could withstand a lot being thrown at it, gave slow but sure rise to the EC of today.

However, EC is an old building. Despite a heroic effort from maintenance, from a quality of life standpoint it is certainly due for an upgrade. What that upgrade looks like is very dependent on a set of institutional processes, and these are processes which - having studied to understand some of them - I do not think have necessarily worked in favour of student culture or for MIT to be ambitious with a project like this. I have broken down this analysis into three scales; institutional decision making, user involvement, and the design of the building itself.

4. INSTITUTIONAL DECISION-MAKING AT MIT

Here I will take a look at how contemporary MIT has commissioned the renovation of East Campus. It is first useful to understand that there are gated and non-gated projects that go through campus planning at MIT. Gated projects are things that MIT would like, but cannot fund without major donations - such as the new music centre - so these projects need to have secured 50% of their funding ahead of time. These projects are also more likely to have the President personally involved, which adds a layer of respectability for any potential donors. Non-gated projects tend to be things which are essential to the running of MIT so the initiation of these projects is funded internally, and then if needed donor funding is sought out at a later date. A dormitory is considered non-gated for this purpose.

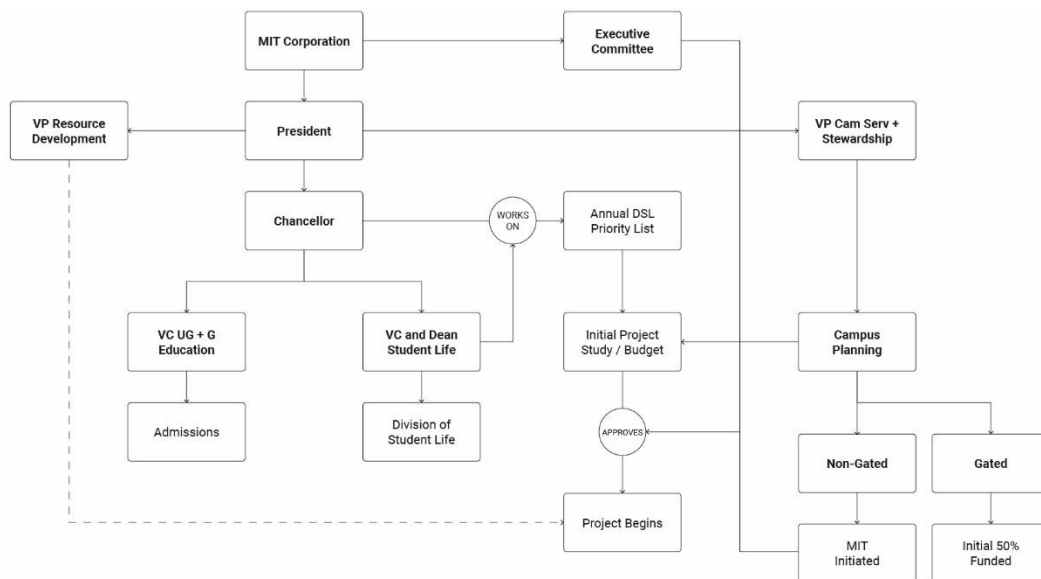


Fig. 8: Framework for commissioning East Campus' renovation

As expected, the various institutional offices around MIT will hold yearly budgetary meetings to discuss capital needs. With respect to all things student life, a yearly meeting is held between the Chancellor and the Vice Chancellor and Dean for Student Life in order to set out capital priorities and where to allocate funds; in recent years the renovation of East Campus would have been high up on that list. As part of MIT's 2030 capital projects plan, a certain amount of money would have been earmarked for renovations and the decision would have been made to syphon a portion of this funding to begin the renovation of EC.

There was then an initial study conducted with campus planning looking at high-level options for EC that will have discussed whether to renovate all at once or tackle each parallel separately, whether to do a partial or a full renovation, how to manage the fact that it is a historic building, and how it will fulfil the needs of MIT. That study is then used to make a few key decisions which are put

forward as a project budgetary proposal by the Chancellor for approval. Approval is done via an executive committee from the MIT corporation which controls where money is spent and releases the funding for large projects (any project over \$5million).

Resource Development - this is the office that deals with donor and alumni fundraising - was watching this process, but as mentioned above because this is a non-gated project, Resource Development will wait until some design options have been produced later on in the project's timeline before working on outreach.

5. INSTITUTIONAL DECISION-MAKING AT MIT; PROPOSAL

I'm going to make my first suggestion based on the commissioning process outlined above. While I did not have a seat at these discussions, my assumptions based on talking to those who did is that the current approach of discussing high-level limitations in order to appeal to a potentially conservative approvals process, feels like it would greatly limit the potential of the project.

For projects like the renovation of EC which have this potential to be historically significant as well as impactful on the future of MIT, I would suggest an alternative approach that favours placing design ambition ahead of the budgetary approvals process.

A year or so ahead of time MIT would contract a design firm to consult DSL's Priorities, but also work with students, admissions, and resource development. The goal being to understand who the building is for, why is this building and community important to MIT's future (beyond simply satisfying a need for beds or dining options), and how the project can use its ambition and narrative from the get go to attract further funding to support that ambition.

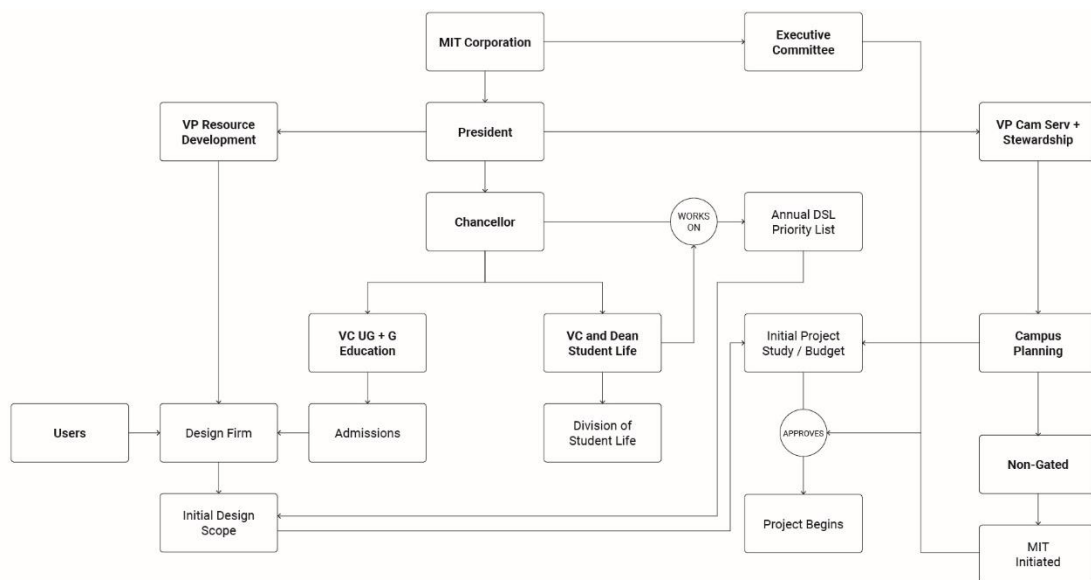


Fig. 9: Revised East Campus commissioning framework including new design scope

By involving students earlier, it also helps MIT improve on its aims for student involvement from what is currently in the realm of tokenism towards something closer to partnership. Chiara Dorbolò (Dorbolò, We Participate, They Profit, 2020) warns of the danger of participation becoming a form of advertising used by institutions.

This initial design scope - these big ambitious design moves - subsequently inform the budgetary proposal, along with the fact that donor outreach has already begun a year or so prior. So in effect it would mix the early donor outreach of a gated project, but have the release of funds through a non-gated process in order to commission the early design work.

This is a strategy that has been used successfully on other institutional projects; for instance the strategic vision for the International Red Cross campus in Geneva that was produced by Urbz (Echanove, Srivastava, Khosravi, & Kochery, 2021), an urban action and research collective that specialises in participatory planning and design practices. In this instance Urbz worked with various members of the ICRC, ran workshops, conducted interviews, and produced a long document that described a future prospective narrative for the ICRC. The scale is larger, but the principle of allowing the project breathing room at the start opens up the possibility for unexpected benefits and solutions.

The conception of East Campus in its earliest days was built on the ambition of administration, a sense of experimentation, and funded through the excitement of alumni; it does not seem a stretch of the imagination to believe a similar process may have been followed here.

6. USER INVOLVEMENT

Moments after the email announcing that EC would be the next dormitory under renovation, the students at EC let out a collective scream into the courtyard; a long community tradition of solidarity in the face of troubling news. Later that afternoon an email from EC's student leadership was sent out announcing the formation of an internal renovations committee; a committee to organise and promote the voices of residents. This committee was officially formed at the conclusion of spring finals.

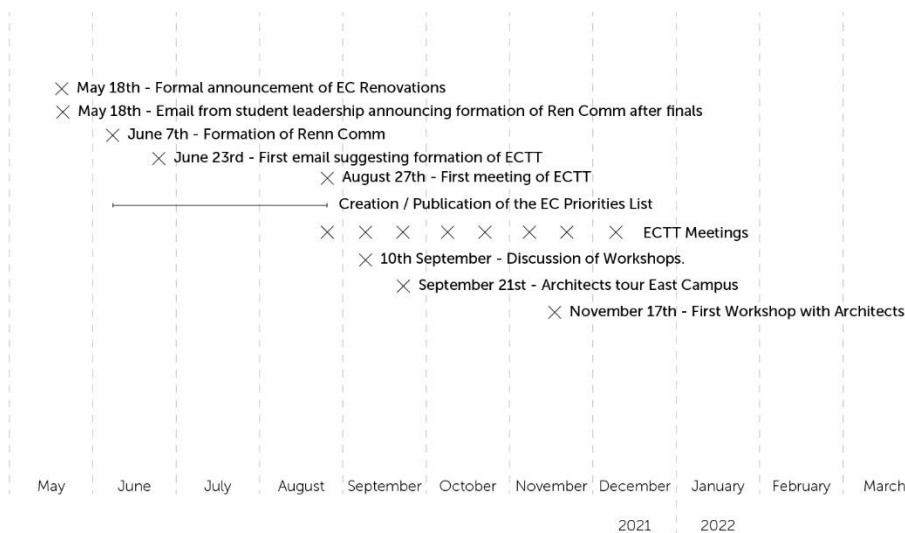


Fig. 10: Resident engagement timeline

The next important occurrence was the first email which suggested the formation of an East Campus Transition Team (ECTT). This would be the committee formed from members of MIT admin, the house team, students, and the project team, and would act as the official committee running the student engagement within the project. The email was sent out at the end of June; however, the first meeting of this committee did not take place until the end of August.

Between those dates, the internal renovations committee worked on and sent to the MIT admin involved in the renovation an East Campus Priorities document. Effectively this document was a long list of priorities from the students' side regarding both the process of renovation as well as what would go into the design.

During the first meetings of the ECTT the group set out to discern certain parameters around the project and then subsequently began to work through the priorities for the project, including tempering any expectations against requirements and constraints. The meetings were held once every two weeks over the majority of the fall semester and often contained around fifteen to twenty attendants.

A set of workshops, which were intended to involve residents in the design process through a collaborative process with the project architects, were discussed the second meeting into the semester, and although suggested themes were immediately tabled and put forward the first workshop did not take place until the latter half of November.

From my observations a lack of delegation within the ECTT, a lack of direct action, and a lack of planning caused the delay. The ECTT meetings were attempting to cover too much ground in too little time, and although working subgroups were suggested these did not materialise in an effective state until much later. Suggestions would also require multiple email chains and consultations with various members of the ECTT before anything was decided upon, which made the process of change sluggish. The workshops could well have been organised ahead of the semester such that they were ready to begin shortly after the semester's beginning.

During the first workshop, the priority was to gather student thoughts on EC and the renovation at various scales; the hall scale, the courtyard scale, and at the scale of its wider MIT environment. The methods of interaction used were typical of architects; post-its, scribbling, maps, and programmatic boxes. These are all widely known tools and I have no specific critique on them. My concern however is that both the topics covered arrived too early in the workshop process and that the workshop itself attempted to cover too much ground. Students were giving their thoughts on, for instance; bathrooms, the placement of security, what EC meant to them, how they arrived at the dormitory, what lounge locations should be post renovation, and the sizes of windows. What was covered contained a lot of what the students would like to see - which is not an issue in and of itself - but I do believe it lacked the possibility of allowing the architects to understand EC on a deeper, more fundamental level. The breadth of things talked about caused the workshop to lack a particular direction, and without an underlying direction it becomes more difficult to value certain information.

However, I do not lay the fault of this at the feet of the architects. The two issues discussed above I credit to the earlier issue of the workshops having been delayed by slow bureaucratic processes. By the time the first workshop eventually arrived, it is understandable that the design team would want to cover as much ground as possible given their contractual obligations to MIT and the deadlines in the design process that they needed to meet.

Not long after that first workshop, it was announced that the project had been pushed back by a year. From what I could gather the cause of this was budgetary, a lack of available contractors, and the rising cost of certain materials. What this meant was that the project timeline allowed for a more relaxed pace of engagement with students. However, the opportunity to look more in depth at EC was never explicitly taken and subsequent workshops and progress on the design simply carried forward from that first workshop. My concluding concern is that the foundations on which the current design is based may miss out on producing a proposal which captures the soul or 'Id' of EC because of both delays and the approach in engaging students.

7. USER INVOLVEMENT; PROPOSAL (TIMELINE)

The suggestions of changes to user involvement are split into two parts; an alternative timeline for student engagement and an experimental game which attempts to answer the question of what an earlier workshop might look like that attempts to capture the ‘id’ of EC.

To begin with, I will reset the timeline to the announcement of the renovation in May 2021. The Division of Student life was certainly aware of the nature of the EC community and so would have expected that residents would seek maximum participation in the project.

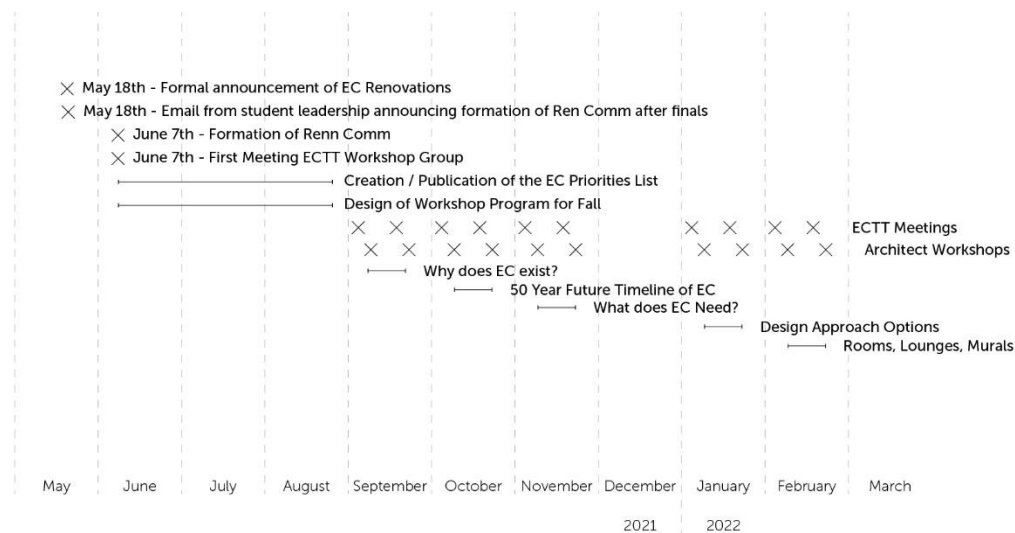


Fig. 11: Revised resident engagement timeline

At around the time the internal renovations committee was formed by residents after finals, my first suggestion here would have been the formation of an early subgroup of the ECTT ready to begin designing the workshop process. This would allow for ample time over the summer months to prepare overarching goals and a schedule for the participatory sessions between architects and students. Subsequently, at the start of fall semester these sessions would have begun almost immediately and the concurrent ECTT meetings would have had more space and time to discuss non-design related questions, such as logistics around temporary accommodation and student support.

The next suggestion would be to stagger the topics of the participatory workshops such that each topic is addressed as it becomes relevant in the design process. The very first thing to be addressed being an attempt to understand why the EC community exists in the first place. For this question to be asked successfully the design of the new dormitory should not be alluded to in any form; as this would distract and mislead participants into giving suggestions or detailing physical faults with the current building. Understanding a community that is tied to a particular space is a more metaphysical than physical undertaking – a building does not make a community; the power of architecture is limited in that regard. Another question to ask here would be; why does EC matter?

What makes it important to MIT? What about EC's importance to MIT does MIT overlook – and here I will return to an earlier section to suggest that EC encompasses the ideal vehicle for maturing students into caring, thoughtful, and engaged citizens. I understood this only through living and interacting with students for a year prior in my capacity as a GRA; I worry that the architects may have missed how crucial this point is in the first workshop as well as a (I would speculate based on discussions) softened corporate-friendly narrative offered to them through MIT's admin (but not necessarily the students themselves who are more forthright in their discussion).

The next couple workshops in this hypothetical scenario would then perhaps begin to map out a speculative future of EC with the residents and house team; what are the narratives around that? EC's community is certainly a narrative-based one; stories, myths, and legends are the basis of passing culturally significant traditions and information from one generation of students to the next, and this is what allows for the strong continuity of hall-based identity. An acknowledgement of this and a design of the participatory workshops around this fact would have allowed the architects to speak the language of EC; rather than asking the residents to speak the language of architecture.

At the conclusion of these initial workshops, enough information about EC would have been gathered such that the architects could begin to speculate on what EC might actually need, and not necessarily replicating what was already there or else conforming to MIT's understanding of what it requires from the dormitory. In instances like this, the most successful and appropriate designs come about when an entity like MIT relinquishes control of the process and entrusts it with those who can delve deeper into an issue than MIT's corporate structure allows it to. Only once the answer to the question 'what does EC actually need' is known can the specifics of the design be explored effectively.

8. USER INVOLVEMENT; PROPOSAL (PARTICIPATORY GAME)

In order to understand how a designer might have run the earliest participatory workshops – those that try to get at the ‘id’ of EC – I designed and tested out a set of experimental games.

The design of the game came primarily from two starting points: my own understanding of how the EC community operated (which would form a semi-hypothesis for what the game might reveal) and a precedent from the world of urban planning.

At the time of designing the game, my experience with EC led me to believe that spatially speaking, a large portion of how EC culture operates is built around objects. These are objects from many origins – it may be a concrete bollard or it may be a drinks machine – and they have made their way into the dormitory for numerous different reasons, but what connects them is the way that EC imbues objects with narratives. The narratives attached to these objects allow EC residents to tell historic stories of their origin and thus impart various pieces of tradition from one person to another (and from one generation to another). In another sense, objects form a distinct language and cultural library within EC. The concrete bollard for instance was coveted by various halls and was eventually stolen by one hall from another and transported with such effort up numerous flights of stairs that it became infeasible for the previous hall to return it. The drinks machine, incredibly, made its way up via a jerry-rigged (but well-engineered) gantry onto the third floor and was transported through a window; where it was refurbished by students and is restocked by an annual ‘Soda Lord’. Without the accrual of objects on hall, these stories would not exist, and perhaps neither would EC in its current manifestation.



Fig. 12: A partial 3D scan of a shared space at East Campus

Another interesting thing of note about EC’s relationship with objects is in the way in which they define a space. In dormitories where the accrual of objects is disallowed or frowned upon, there

are limited sets of agreed-upon space defining objects which are placed in spaces with a specific use function. Think chairs, a sofa, and a coffee table within a lounge, or one bed, one dresser, and one desk within a bedroom. That EC enables for the collection and redistribution of objects across its halls and spaces, the objects begin to alter the function of the spaces they inhabit such that spaces are in a flux of use. Almost like, in Lucien Kroll's *MéMé* (a product of an involved, participatory design process with residents); "everything communicates and opens, each element sees and can understand and meet the other" (Poletti, 2010). A bedroom, for instance, may be transformed into a nightclub temporarily by the arrival of particular objects on a given night, a lounge space transformed into a makerspace by the accrual of particular pieces of equipment and tools, or a hall space transformed into a gallery. It is not that these occurrences cannot happen elsewhere, it is that they come naturally to the residents of EC. A space at EC is rarely ever tied to a single function but seems to fluctuate based on which objects are present at any given moment and the meaning then given to those objects.

The mechanics of the game were partially influenced by an urban planning workshop run at the University of Michigan called the *Incomplete City* (Boyer, 2020), which itself was based on an earlier set of workshops run by Danish urban planner Dan Hill. During this workshop participants were given graphic urban elements; things that were smaller than a building – think vehicles, benches, turbines, and trees – and then asked in teams to create a neighbourhood by tracing, drawing, and pasting. Abstract boxes would be used to represent buildings, but the aim with the workshop was to define all of the space that connected these buildings; to understand what it meant to create an urban landscape. They began on a small neighbourhood scale and then increasingly over the course of the workshop collaborated with other groups and brought their designs together into eventually one large city. Each time the scale increased and they brought their previous design together with other groups' they had to navigate and negotiate what infrastructure was needed to complete the join and satisfy each groups' priorities.

The goal of the workshop was ultimately to understand how a particular set of people collectively navigated and decided upon producing space at an urban scale. My thought process was to take this approach at an urban scale and shrink it to the scale of a dormitory. Instead of neighbourhoods and cities, the scales here would be private spaces, shared hall spaces, and dormitory commons, urban elements smaller than a building would become objects, and rather than urban space connecting buildings, the space defined would connect rooms, or halls.



Fig. 13: Objects presented to game participants



Fig. 14: Private space from day 1

The appearance of the game took its initial inspiration from Minecraft; a game with which many residents are at least familiar. Architecture and spatial design are not necessarily intuitive languages to understand; it takes years of training and architects sometimes forget that the average person is not trained to understand plans, sections, or elevations with the same spatial awareness. However, by taking the language of simple three-dimensional games like Minecraft, it is possible to

aim for a more immersive, equitable experience for participants.



Fig. 15: Private space from day 1

The translation of both these starting points into a game format was to provide participants with a simple grid space (the playing board) to populate with elements (objects) in order to define space. Contained within the gameplay of Minecraft are a simple set of rules which define how the player interacts with the world. Rather than limiting gameplay, the rules – in my observations from playing the game – provide the perfect balance between constraint and nurturing creativity. When I compared this with the way that EC operated; the delicate balance of rules that still allowed for an incredible creativity within the dorm space, the final adjustment to the game design was to introduce a simple set of constraints that would inform how they approached the object placement. These were:

1. The first object must be placed in the centre of the board.
2. No object may be place more than 5 squares from another object.

And then for the times where abstract blocks (rooms, halls) were to be connected:

3. All blocks must be connected by objects.

Participants were also asked to incorporate a basic narrative into their designs, by arranging objects in such a way that both enable their own thoughts on what a room, shared hall space, dormitory commons out to be, as well as the narrative.



Fig. 16: Shared hall space from day 2

The game was laid over three consecutive days in early February of 2022. Participants were asked to sign up ahead of time and, prior to the start of the game, complete a short survey asking a few simple questions:

1. Find an object in your room that has some personal, strange, or unique reason for being there, upload a picture and describe the story of the object.
2. Find an object in your hall that has some cultural, strange, or unique reason for being there, upload a picture and describe the story of the object.
3. Draw a map of a day you've had at East Campus (it can be any day you choose, or one that has some significance - for instance; helping on a REX project, or a hall event), think about the landmarks on your journey and events that happened there. The map does not need to be "geographically accurate" nor contain personal information - your experience and interpretation of the journey are more important here. If you like, you may annotate the map with events, thoughts, and experiences.
4. Is there something that you would like to see changed about East Campus?
5. (A space for free thoughts).

The purpose of the survey was to complement the set of basic objects that I had modelled and collected with objects native EC, to further my understanding of how residents related to objects, and to further my understanding of how residents moved around the dormitory. The question relating to change was reference material, and not directly related to the game.

Each of the three days tackled a different scale; room (private space), shared hall space, and the dormitory commons. The outcome of these workshops was never to ascertain a direct translation of

requests for the renovation. Instead, it was about trying to understand if more fundamental things about East Campus culture would reveal themselves in the process.

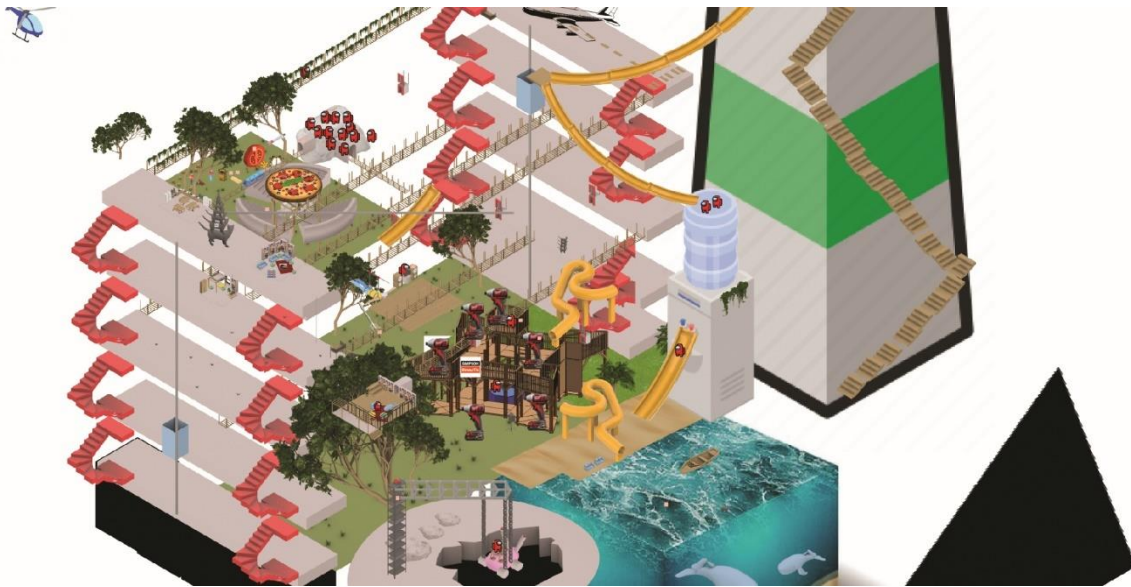


Fig. 17: Dormitory commons from day 3

In general, the game was a success and the participants enjoyed the process. There were approximately fifteen participants in each session, with some participants able to attend all three days and some attending for two or one.

I had three takeaways from the sessions; two from observation and one from feedback.

1. First was that objects were stripped of original meaning. Despite a fairly mundane set of objects provided, participants would routinely strip these objects of their perceived use in order to fashion new objects from them. Often combining these objects with external photos / fragments of culture beyond the community. This helps to confirm my earlier suspicion of a set of traditions that allows objects to alter the meaning of a space, this is a culture very capable of constantly recycling and reinventing an object's use value.
2. Room vs. Hall vs. Dorm. Participants seemed to enjoy the process with smaller groups. Once it came to the dorm scale game, a social order arose which naturally preferences certain voices over others. That gives me the impression that private space is therefore very valuable for individuals to express their identity, especially for those who - for whatever reason - may not have as much of a say at either a hall or dorm level.
3. Unbridled creativity is the goal. This was partially based feedback from a few participants; who mentioned that the sense of joy brought about from a direct connection of brain to creation with little interference, captured part of what they felt to be the spirit of East Campus.

The rules of the game were appreciated as creating parameters to play without limiting the creative process.

9. APPROACHING THE DESIGN

In order to test the suggestions that I put forward earlier in this thesis and the knowledge gained from the participatory game, the concluding exercise of this thesis was to translate these findings into a proposal.

The proposal is framed as an alternative history of the project – a potential ‘could have been’ beginning with both the alternative timeline suggested in sections 2.2. This route was taken to maximise the impact of comparing it to the current design path’s outcome.

The proposal begins with the assumption that MIT had commissioned an early design scope a year or two ahead of any public announcement of the renovation. This process would have been overseen by – ideally – designers who also specialise in community programming or participatory design practice. Those involved at this point in time would be residents, MIT admissions, the resource development office, with perhaps some consultations with DSL and campus planning. The outcome of this would be a set of design strategies, aspirational visions, and an understanding of what is needed (and not necessarily what is requested). At this stage it is important not to be led by constraints set forward by MIT, as the materials and vision here will then be used to generate excitement amongst both EC alumni and any potential donors with the understanding that constraints have – for the large part – been financial and so can theoretically be overcome by increasing donor potential.

MIT relies on funding from donors, and so MIT relies on its marketing potential. At the time of writing the current real-world process has led the renovation design to a point where the narrative has been dominated by the need to sacrifice one of the hall communities in order to make room for the increased amenity space and to make up for the loss of basement space. This narrative will make for a much harder sell to alumni and donors (as it is born of compromise and not necessarily ambition – at least at a glance).

However, had a design scope and alumni / donor outreach program been started ahead of time, the narrative could very well have been ‘let us add an additional floor to the building. It will require more substantial work than a simpler renovation, but we believe it will make for an exceptional dormitory. We also have the opportunity for a donor to name the new 11th hall community’. Given the timeframe, the reality of whether or not this sort of money could be made available would have been ascertained ahead of time, and closer to the beginning of the renovation process as a decision could then be made as to whether the ambition needs to be scaled back in line with a more modest budget.

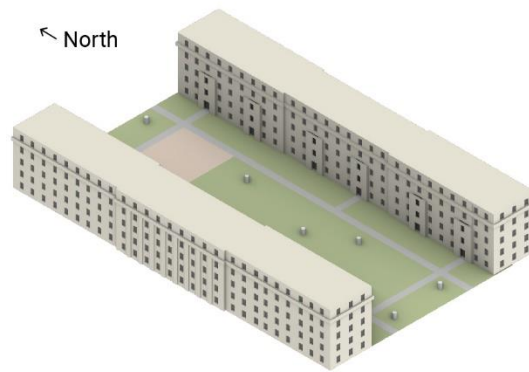


Fig. 18: Existing building and mature tree placement within courtyard

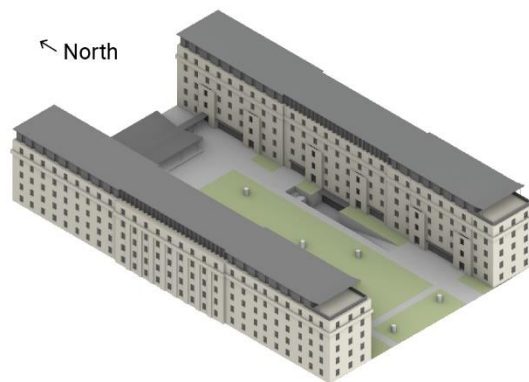


Fig. 19: Renovated building showing roof extension, cuts into first floor, the ramp, and the pavilion

Once the overarching strategy of adding an additional floor had been made, the next step was to define the underlying approach to all aspects of design. This is in response to the experimental participatory game as well as observations made at EC which told of the importance of physical interface with the building and object collection as two distinct languages of EC culture. Robustness is key; what I mean by this is a building that anticipates a lot of heavy wear, but is built to withstand that wear intentionally as well as allow for the absorption of that wear into a cultural patina. This sort of strategy - similar to the original conception - is of benefit to both MIT in that the building becomes naturally sustainable and less likely to require maintenance (thus saving money in the long term) but also of benefit to the community in that it enables and encourages a continuation of building interface, learning, and a cultural communication.

Once the core value of the project was known to be robustness, other key moves then followed which are based on a practical knowledge of how EC operates, in order to set a practical ‘stage’ for the interior design:

1. The two roof extensions each contain a new hall, a shared balcony, and the plant room.
2. Amenities are consolidated on the ground floor of the East Parallel, while large openings are cut into façade of the ground floor in order to brighten the interior.
3. A new public, Ames Street facing entrance is created on the north west corner of the East Parallel to consolidate and simplify the mail, deliveries, and visitor access.
4. An access ramp is placed in the courtyard which leads down to an external entrance into the basement. This is to facilitate the creation of a large dual-level workshop space, where the basement portion is used as a ‘dirt-room’ or staging area. This answers the requirement to move all expensive equipment and amenities out of the basement but still allows for the utilisation of useful basement space.
5. A covered walkway is placed into the north end of the courtyard which mirrors the underground passageway between the parallels in the south end. The secondary function of this walkway is to provide a visual barrier along the north edge of the dormitory which provides further privacy for residents without barring public access.
6. A dedicated outdoor bike storage and covered bbq pavilion is built either side of the walkway.

The external changes to East Campus are designed to be visible and clear in terms of what is new and what is old out of respect to the existing building. However, there is also the understanding that the dormitory was borne from ambition and so the narrative behind any alterations should not be led by conservatism but should follow the spirit of the original.

The approach to the interiors of the project is a combination of what I have understood from resident, staff, and MIT requirements, as well as the output of the experimental workshop and then my own interpretation as a designer.

Much like the participatory game I have broken it into three scales; private space, shared hall space, and the dormitory commons; and I will discuss the approach to each below.

The private spaces (rooms) are simple. There is a structural rail at approximately six and a half feet from the floor, a set of built-in storage units at the back of the room, and a number of ceiling anchors. These interventions align with the demand for robustness.

The rail allows for multiple ways for a student to customise and interface with their room. It can enable a plank to be screwed on top and the plank can then support any timber-based construction. There is a hooked ledge which allows for murals / hangings / boards to be hooked and hung. Lastly there is a simple rail below the hooked ledge for curtains.

The storage is plywood construction. Easily built and easily maintained. The top of the storage forms the same structural platform system as the rail.

The ceiling anchors provide a formalised structural system to build from. Ceiling anchors are a common sight in EC, so by formalising this particular system it provides longevity and reduces maintenance needs with minimal impact on creative potential.

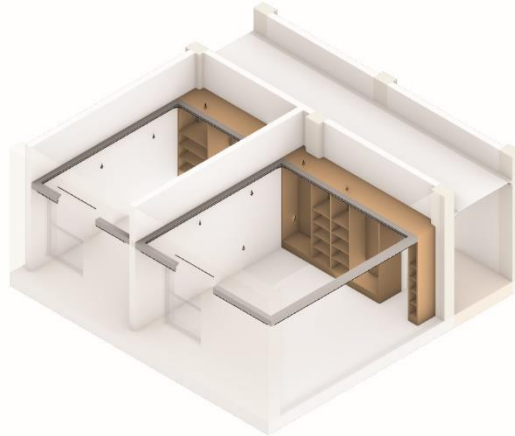


Fig. 20: Private space layout showing rail system, ceiling hooks, and storage



Fig. 21: Private space view showing rail system, ceiling hooks, and storage

Like the participatory game, think of the room as a grid; a playing board. Along with that board there is a set of basic rules that provide bounds within which to play. For the private space these rules are:

1. Do not paint or interface with the walls.

2. Do not paint or interface with any essential services painted yellow.
3. Do not paint and interface with the construction system.

The hall layout follows much of the form factor of the existing hall, but with some improvements. The shared space is split between two core attractors; a roaming lounge and a large multipurpose area. Given the simple nature of the room construction; I suggest a roaming lounge to cater for future hall culture shifts. The roaming lounge would fit within a single structural ‘bay’ and, perhaps, every five years or so it would be of relatively little effort to swap this lounge with another room, depending on where and how a particular hall wants its arrangement.

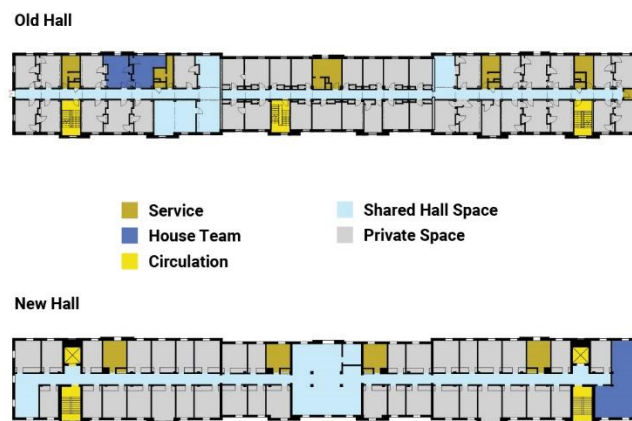


Fig. 22: Comparison between old and new hall typical hall layouts



Fig. 23: View showing interior of large multipurpose space

The large multipurpose space in the centre of the hall contains food preparation equipment, laundry, and open lounge space; and functions as the central gathering space for a given hall community. Like the bedrooms, the railing system and ceiling anchors are here to allow for multiple configurations of the space. The railing system continues into the corridors.

Once more, a set of simple rules:

1. Do paint, but do not interface with the walls.
2. Do not paint or interface with any essential services painted yellow.
3. Do paint and interface with the construction system.

Unlike the bedrooms which are ‘reset’ each year, the shared hall space – as I have been informed – does not require repainting. Hence the allowance for painting directly onto walls where it has no effect on maintenance. This then allows for the important accumulation of a cultural language through artwork, murals, scribblings, memes, and musings.

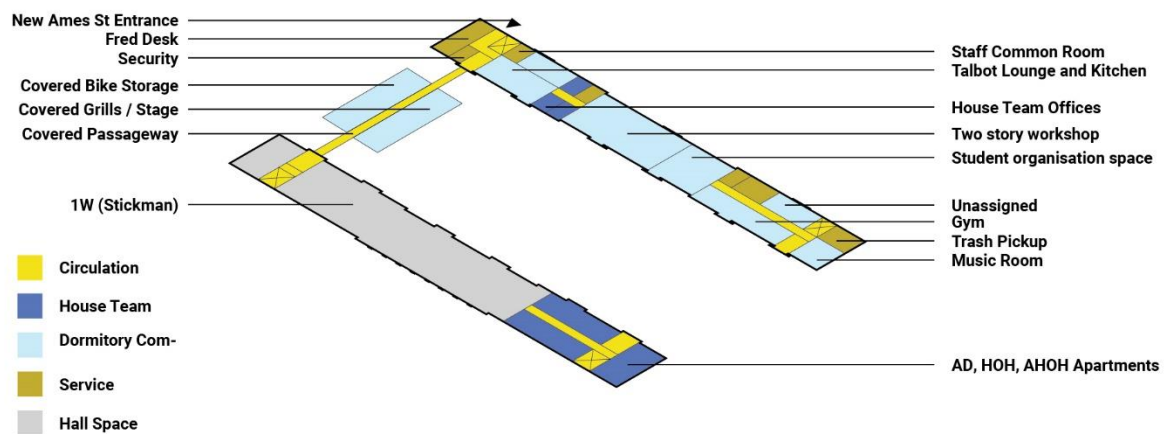


Fig. 24: Layout of dormitory commons (first floor)



Fig. 25: View of dual level workshop space, looking out to the courtyard ramp

On the dormitory commons, as stated above, one ground floor is given to amenities. The new entrance along Ames Street has security, mail, and house team offices concentrated around it. The rest of the space within the east parallel is occupied by common lounge (named Talbot), the gym, music and performance studios, the makerspace / workshop (cantered within the parallel with two levels and the basement ramp), student leadership offices, and event storage. The west parallel contains house team apartments and the Stickman community (1W).

Again, a set of simple rules:

1. Do paint, but do not interface with the walls.
2. Do not paint or interface with any essential services painted yellow.
3. Do paint and interface with the construction system.

10. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I will conclude this thesis on an honest and sombre note. Personally, I am uncomfortable about the way the renovation is progressing. Let me reiterate that I do not think any individuals are to blame; everyone that I have had the pleasure of interacting with and working alongside desires the best out this project for all involved. I understand also that the complexities of such a project will always lead to a compromise of wills. However, at an institutional level I worry that the general attitude and approach that MIT has towards its housing is not compatible with a homegrown culture like EC.

To begin with the commissioning process appears to lack ambition and for a project as unique as EC ambition and some amount of risk is required. Certain levels of risk avoidance may appear prudent in the short term (and MIT's administrative decision-making pipeline may well be set up to favour these shorter-term decisions), but for longer term investments a certain amount of risk can provide ample benefits. EC is a one-hundred-year project; MIT does itself no favours by artificially limiting resources for a project like this.

One of the expressions that was consistently used by administration of all levels in response to any suggestion that the renovated EC may harm EC culture was that 'communities adapt and change'. It takes little knowledge of history to know that a culture being required to adapt to new circumstances is not necessarily a positive thing, which leads me to believe that MIT is implicitly suggesting that it no longer wants EC culture in its current form. If this is the case MIT does need to be honest about this with its students.

For a given building, the design ultimately commands little power over how users inhabit the space. Architects can certainly encourage particular ways of occupying a space, and we are taught to analyse how people live in order to enhance what is already there, but for the development of a community like EC more often than not it is certain policy, freedoms, and happenstance that allow it to take root. In a superficial sense, such as the surface of New Vassar's interior, a designer may write some nice words on columns in the dining area, or provide areas for socialisation, but there is no guarantee that the community which occupies this space will adopt any of these suggestions. It begs the question of where design thinking and architectural responses are relevant in all this.



Fig. 26: Interior of East Campus (left), interior of New Vassar (right)

Many of the issues I have spoken about are policy based. This thesis has been for the most part observing and recording the process of the renovation thus far and I have been reminded just how much any architectural response is indebted to those who make budgetary and administrative decisions. Architecture can be powerful, but only if it has the freedom from MIT to become so, and even then, its power is unlocked through careful integration with ambitious, equitable policy.

It is about giving a community the freedom to - on its own terms - figure out what it wants to be. If this is not possible within MIT's framework then maybe the real solution to the survival of EC here is to have it become a cooperative and remove itself from the dormitory system. It would be promising to see MIT show understanding that it needs to take on some risk to get the reward of hosting a community as culturally productive as EC; it cannot expect sterile environments to be the birthplace of cultural innovation. As suggested in this thesis, the risk would be relinquishing control over the early stages of the project to allow it to be led by ambition and experimentation throughout its conception. The architectural response and the design of policy would then work hand in hand to enable and enhance the culture in a sensitive and appropriate manner.

A lot of the small incremental changes that MIT has been implementing with EC to restrict its freedoms may seem like they do not make a big difference when you point them out individually - such as no longer painting directly on walls to save on perceived maintenance costs or to appear cleaner for summer residents, or removing the ability for students to construct under the guise of health and safety concerns - but over time these are removing distinct methods of communication that the EC community relies on in order to maintain and structure itself. By removing languages that a culture uses to communicate, ultimately you remove the culture.

In the end MIT needs to be up front and honest about what it wants and where it wants to go and what that means for EC and similar communities over the next twenty to thirty years. A lot of the

pain points and confusion I have seen around this project are down to certain things that are being left unsaid being the very things controlling the decisions in the background. Maybe not now, but a couple decades into the future I believe MIT may struggle to bridge the dissonance between the fact that it markets some of these highly unique campus communities to attract a diverse set of students, if at the backend certain decisions have effectively eroded away a lot of what makes these communities possible in the first place.

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