Get with the Program

by Frances Watson Lengowski

Architectural programming sets the stage for thriving residence hall communities.

Wayland Hall (l) and Hoffman Hall (r) on James Madison University’s campus

Think about what is happening at any given time in a campus residence hall. Movies are being shown in the lounge. Students are being counseled in small meeting rooms or playing pool in the lobby. Programs are being led in a classroom. People are hanging out in the hall director’s apartment. Hallmates are cooking dinner together.

Before a building is even designed, architectural programming considers all these possibilities and more. Planning for the life of a building – both the organized events and the activities that happen when nobody is looking – is the major challenge at the programming stage. Technically, an architectural program is a list of spaces; and when accompanied by the square footage and a brief description of each space, it serves as the simplest description of a building project. However, this simple document is a pivotal component of a project that creates a guide for the architecture to come.

In creating the right architectural program for a residence hall construction project, it is recognized that a smart set of spaces can effectively support the long-term programmatic goals for the life of a building. A building design facilitates the activities and interactions that shape a community. For example, a building designed to include the hang-out spots, study spaces, program rooms, and recreation opportunities will help generate a buzzing sense of activity in a building even when no planned events are happening. And a properly programmed building anticipates what is needed for planned activities, documenting the square footage and resources needed to serve the events comfortably and smoothly.

A thoughtful architectural program can give life to the goals of an administration and to the residence life division. Furthermore, a close look at the programmatic needs of a building can help to create a checklist that is useful in
evaluating existing buildings. The program becomes a lens, helpful in judging the potential for an existing building to support current needs. A critical look at the potential to house a program helps to avoid the danger of working with untested assumptions.

**CREATE THE PROGRAM**

Any one person can sit down and create a list of desired spaces, but architectural expertise is needed to size the spaces appropriately for the anticipated occupancy, furnishing, and equipment needs. The most successful architectural programs are developed through a series of conversations with designers and campus stakeholders. Through individual interviews or group conversations, input from a broad spectrum of perspectives ensures that the building is shaped to respond to the needs of students and residence life staff as it fulfills a particular vision. The building design influences the lives of many, including students, residence life staff, and maintenance staff. For this reason, it is best for each of these groups to have a voice in the process.

At James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, programming strategies have evolved over more than a decade as the university has renovated the residential portion of the historic Bluestone campus. Initial planning for the Bluestone renovations focused on replacing the systems and finishes of the buildings, which were originally constructed between 1911 and 1964. However, as the projects have developed, the residence life program at James Madison has embraced the renovations as an opportunity to re-think how the buildings are used by students.

For example, the third Bluestone renovation, Gifford Hall, carved public space into a building densely packed with student bedrooms. Now with two-thirds of the entire ground floor devoted to student activities, students have ample space to gather in formal and informal venues. The growth of public space inherently meant a loss of beds in the building. However, an allegiance to the goal of improving the quality of the residence hall community—not the quantity of its members—justified the investment in the new spaces.

Five years later, similar strategies in the renovation of Hoffman Hall also led to a stronger sense of community. As it turns out, the plans to encourage community dovetailed perfectly with the growing number of living-learning communities on campus. In fact, the eco-centered community has found an ideal home in Hoffman Hall, where the new classroom and study spaces now host shared classes, study groups, and discussion sessions among learning community residents.

Building on the success of the preceding projects, programming related to James Madison's Wayland Hall renovation is taking advantage of the early planning stage to incorporate a highly specialized learning community from the beginning. This community, dedicated to the visual and performing arts, will include a gallery, music practice rooms, an art studio, and a performance and exhibition room. This 1,000-square-foot space will facilitate impromptu collaboration and group practice for dancers, musicians, actors, and visual artists. Along with the public spaces now common to the Bluestone renovations, the new spaces will encourage students to live with their art, experiencing and sharing their craft as an integral part of their first-year experience. All aspects of the program, including an ambitious reconfiguration of the bedroom spaces, are designed to encourage interaction, foster collaboration, and create ample opportunity for exposure to the discipline and joy of the arts.

**TEST THE PROGRAM**

Though it creates a framework for building design, an architectural program in isolation is simply a wish list of spaces to include in a building. To be most useful, the program must be tested. Using a conceptual building design, a program comes to life. Seeing the building drawn in a conceptual plan can be a wake-up call to building planners, drawing attention to spaces that are too big, too small, or too numerous.

The conceptual design also reveals how well the building spaces relate to each other and to the larger site. For example, showing where each of a building's public spaces fit on the first floor will reveal how students will initially experience their building. Frequently, early conceptual design reveals questions or problems that can only be answered or solved with a clear understanding of what the building should be. This concept will guide decisions on how to set priorities for what is included in a building and where each space is located. This vision must be understood through the development of a building design. Ideally, all involved will have a strong understanding of this vision when moving into financial analysis of the building design.

Just as the conceptual plans test the spatial feasibility of a program, a cost estimate tests the financial feasibility of a program. In both cases it is important to use a concept of the project to guide decisions for getting an over-sized or over-budget project back on track. Because a program includes a clear listing of the square footage in a building, pairing the program with cost per square foot numbers infuses an architectural program with a clearer understanding of a building's projected cost. Because different spaces inherently have different associated
costs (per square foot, a bedroom is significantly less expensive to construct, for example, than a fully equipped commercial kitchen facility), this analysis roughly projects the financial investment required to bring an architectural program to reality.

At Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, thoughtful programming is developing a nurturing and rich first-year experience for its students. A building campaign begun in 2006 anticipated a campus precinct of residence halls to house the entire first-year class. The specialized programming includes ample space for student recreation, group study, and events housed in classrooms and project rooms. These spaces bring together the first-year class (formerly spread out across campus) into a village-like community where students can learn, play, hang out, and grow together. Perhaps the most specialized space of the buildings is a demonstration kitchen — complete with commercial-grade appliances — that provides many sustainability-based cooking demonstrations for the campus’ “Sustainability: Living Green” learning community. Students engage in the cooking lessons through multimedia technology in concert with live demonstrations.

In May 2010, the fourth freshman hall will be completed, resulting in 774 beds delivered in the past three years, bringing Emory half-way to its ultimate goal. As Andrea Trinklein, executive director of residence life and housing at Emory, explains, “The freshman housing district consolidates and enriches Emory’s freshman experience. The opportunity to build on the community with defined space to socialize as well as study has been a major focus of the program plan.”

Leaders at both James Madison and Emory have gotten with the program, planning each space of their new building projects to contribute to enriched, healthy residential living. In creating natural opportunities for students to engage in their communities, these projects achieve a vision that connects students’ daily living with broader ambitions for the institution’s development as a whole.

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