A New Face

When I arrived on campus I greatly enjoyed the outdoor scenery—the welcoming brick buildings, the friendly paths, an integrated atmosphere—and the inner scenery of the major buildings, such as Thompson and Christian Cafeteria. Upon moving into the Short/Denny Residence Hall, I was pleased by the inviting lobby. I did not pay much attention to the white walls and white rooms, what with the hustle-and-bustle of move-in day. Then came orientation and finally the ice-breaker games for the incoming freshmen. I had fun. Then, at the end of the day, the audible silence struck me. I felt as if I just arrived at something reminiscent of halfway house. The feeling lingered for a time, then faded into the background. Other residents and I are not comfortable with the atmosphere. Has the inspiring décor affected us students negatively, and will a make-over have a positive effect on us?

I ask because I know blank walls, while practical, are not stimulating. I firmly believe college should be a healthily active, productive, and motivating. Blankness is not very encouraging. Now, I understand the environment does not solely determine actions or motivation, yet it does have a hand in shaping a person. It is no different in college. Presumably, residing students spend a sizable fraction of their time in their rooms and Residence Halls. I
believe a student’s living space affects the entirety of their stay: friends, study habits, moods, and many other factors. Any of them could affect their success in college life.

Resident UCA Professor of Psychology Dr. Bill Lammers has some experience with this question. In an interview he mentioned how lighting is the only factor that by itself can affect humans (this is solved by just opening a window, and letting in real sunlight). All other elements of an environment—color, texture, design, and space—“all come together” and collectively affect the human person. “Some stimuli are distracting” if they do not mesh well with other stimuli—for example, if polka dots or uninteresting pictures were on the walls. However, he does endorse the idea of intellectually and/or educationally décor—such as quotes, pictures, perhaps a hallway of portraits of famous people.

I know an unhealthy environment harms a person, typically by pumping in harmful substances. In this case, I believe the absence of a friendly environment harms students. They have nothing positive surrounding them, just an unfriendly vacuum where everything dissipates. How many persons are comfortable with the color scheme and lighting of a corporate office space? Certainly not college students! Mostly young adults, they are in the last stages of growth. That’s the key. They are still in need of stimulation. The college environment provides this, yet strangely the dormitory rooms appear to be lacking in zest.

I speak specifically of the Short/Denny Residential College, my Residence Hall. “Short Denney Residential College (SDRC) was established in 2006 for freshmen students who are interested in ‘Living the Arts’,” which was specifically the reason I chose it and also why I reapplied for next year (UCA.edu). For me, ‘living the arts’ means exposure to artistry every day. It requires that the new generation of artists, whatever our medium, may look back at the
masters of the past ages, see their example, borrow a tiny bit of their genius, then run off and make something. However, since it is not cost effective to convert Residence Halls into museums, students will just have to settle for tastefully inspiring rooms. I believe the mission statement can be better fulfilled by the redecoration of Short/Denny by the students. I believe it is unhelpful that an artistic residence college be—for lack of a better word—bland. Art is a creative process, and invariably it builds on the works of the previous generation. What is more helpful, a blank slate or a small hint?

I asked my fellow residents their opinions of Short/Denny. Out of a survey of 28 Short/Denny residents, the majority declared that largest discomforts with the hallways, bathrooms, and dorm rooms are the paintjob and pre-existing damage. Before students fully customized their rooms, 14 rated their room a ‘one’ out of five, eight gave their room a ‘two’, and four gave their room a ‘three’. After customization, 9 rated their rooms a ‘four’, six rated a ‘three’, and two a ‘two.’ When asked if they felt the current design was helping them “live the arts,” 16 said ‘no.’ 14 said that an artistic redesign would in fact help them live the motto.

Understandably, the building is old, constructed in the 1960s’. I am not asking for a new hall, but a hall with a new face. A make-over, designed by the students but advised by the university, would assuredly improve the stay of the students and have the coincidental benefit of improving the university’s public relations. Think about it. The Short/Denny halls, and many other Residential Colleges, house freshmen. Now away from home, most would suffer some level of discomfort. A friendly environment would assuredly relieve stress, a major problem. A friendlier atmosphere would relax all but the most paranoid and thus help students be more inclined to communicate with strangers—also known as ‘roommates’.
Students’ rooms are understandably off-limits from re-decorating; the residents change each year and any permanent changes might upset the new residents. At most, a pleasant paint job, a warmer color such as a cream or faded yellow—something other than white. One Denny Resident, Anna Wilson, revealed a peculiar problem with white—any amount of light that hits her walls actually “reflects light into my face while I’m trying to sleep.” A simple coat of cream would not be as stark. Actually, it does not have to be cream. Anything warm and gentle on the eyes would suffice. The point is to make the room cozy. Students need some place to recline after a hectic day. That place should be their room. I estimate that a gallon bucket would cover one room. The market price of a gallon bucket is about $31.98. Roughly estimating, it would cost $4250 for repainting.

In addition to the rooms another complaint has been the communal bathrooms. Understandably, they are semi-public restrooms, so it would be pointless to remodel them with glossy, rose and periwinkle tile. However, some, such as Denny resident Jennie Le, have claimed that they are “not livable,” and others, such as Short resident Matt Lacy, agree. Several students have complained about pre-existing damage (holes, cracks, exposed piping), and one student in a survey even mentioned how a repair job was left half-finished for over a week, and eventually had to do the rest himself. Personally, I do not drink water from the bathroom tap, as I am suspicious of the reddish-tinged film it leaves in my drinking cup. I propose that a pragmatic remodeling—updating the pipes, for example. It’s a bathroom. Students do not live there. It just needs to be clean.

In interviews I asked students if they were on a committee to remodel Short/Denny, what would they suggest? Some, such as Denny resident Allison Young, gave a simple response “throw in some purple, show some school spirit;” others, such as Lacy offered suggestions such
as silhouettes and having thematic “hall of (famous) composers, hall of (famous) authors” and so on painted on the hallway walls of each floor of the Short/Denny building. Invariably, the interviewees unanimously agreed that the walls of the rooms and hallways be something other than white. One Denny Resident, Rebecca Stobaugh, suggested that each floor get together and vote on themes offered by the RA. Everyone would then pitch in and the floor would be decorated in good order. I offer the suggestion that this could be done every semester. It could increase a sense of community and give residents a chance to ‘live the arts.’

Living quarters are a modest part of student welfare. Students cannot avoid them and cannot change them overall. I feel that if the halls are well-maintained and receive a new paintjob then students can feel free to add a personal touch. They do not have to worry about their environment. By having at least one anchor students can focus on academics and just have an enjoyable college experience.
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