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Design for Today's Students

By Karen Dubrovsky | May 1st, 2016

Another wave of high school seniors will tour campus buildings this summer and fall, seeking the ideal school setting. They represent the Class of 2021, worldly students in synch with the latest trends in design, dining and technology. A generation raised on smartphones, they are more inclined to trust student review sites than traditional U.S. News & World Report or USA TODAY school rankings and reviews.

The way students experience a campus continues to push the boundaries of design. High expectations, based in part on the sophisticated retail, dining, recreation and hospitality spaces they enjoy, are setting a higher bar for universities. Ever more flexible and multipurpose spaces to gather, socialize, dine and study are in demand.

Today's academic interiors must therefore be both highly adaptable and competitive with smartly designed commercial environments. More than just a place to eat, a dining hall must offer a range of social options, just as student housing must provide shared space for gatherings and work groups. Fun finishes, multifunctional lighting, sound control, access to technology and flexible furniture can create a "kit of parts" that can be readily reconfigured by staff and students to transform a lobby or lounge into a banquet space, bring tables together for a group project or clear the decks for concerts and streamed events.

DINING AS A SOCIAL AND TEAMING SPACE

Today's student expects to have a range of options that support a corresponding range of socialization — high-top tables or bars for a mid-morning snack, smaller sit-down tables for private or two-person lunches, larger tables that can



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be pulled together for an impromptu study group or party and comfy chairs along the windows for afternoon study with coffee. These spaces are designed to promote interaction and collaboration.

On the campus of Wheaton College in Norton, MA, students are encouraged to perch, socialize and linger in the newly renovated Chase Hall. When the 1960s-era dining hall reopened after a renovation last August, students experienced a transformed space — light, open, airy and comfortable.

A range of new seating options and social destinations were added. Farm tables accommodate large groups, and flexible furnishings can accommodate team study and informal club and social gatherings. The Chase Hall redesign uses varied ceiling heights, color accents and floor patterns to define circulation throughout the space. Zoned security and lighting accommodate after-hours use for events and late night attractions.

Wheaton's Emerson Hall offers a quieter, more traditional setting that nonetheless provides flexibility for special events and larger gatherings. The grand central space, with its rich wood paneling and 15-foot ceilings, has been fully restored. Four fireplaces create focal points for a collection of couches and comfortable chairs, while 6- and 4-top tables in the center can easily be reconfigured for larger groupings. A more private, sunlit "porch" overlooking the quad is furnished with 6-top tables for individual or small-group study and dining.

Flexibility extends to the back-of-the-house spaces. Chase Hall's dining layout is organized by cooking style rather than food type. The induction station can be used to cook omelets in the morning and prepare stir-fry for lunch and dinner. Ovens bake pizza and bread, roast vegetables and transition to cookies for afternoon coffee breaks. Grill and griddle stations take care of breakfast needs and then produce burgers for the lunch rush. Flexible stations, used for multiple functions, reduce equipment redundancies and maximize the space available. Beyond the improved layout and aesthetics, both renovations are a recent example of a global change and repositioning of dining on campus.



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Can you see me now? Wheaton College's Chase Hall, prior to its recent renovation (seen below), was an under-lit dining area with outdated fixtures, monotonous finishes and little flexibility for creative adaptation to more than one use. Recently renovated, the 1957 building now features lightweight loveseats along the windows, café seating for group collaboration and individual study, and high stools to perch. Its flexible furnishings can accommodate conversion for after-hours events. A variety of lighting supports its multiples uses throughout the day.



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1

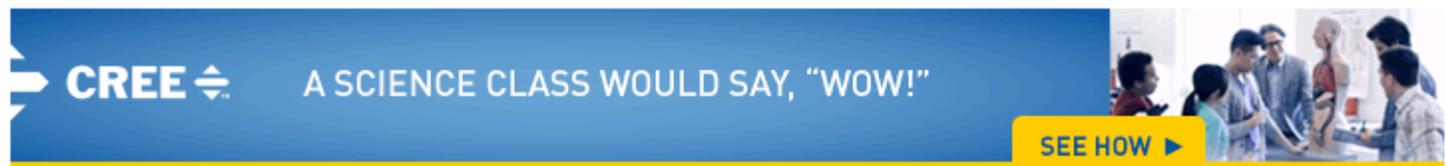
2

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Page 2 of 2

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“The focus is on real-time cooking, right in front of students,” says John Bragel, director of Dining Services. “Nearly all of our food is now prepared to emphasize the experience of ordering freshly made meals and with 100 percent transparency.”

FLEXIBILITY AND MULTIPURPOSE SPACE

Students want to customize their space to suit the occasion. Moveable furniture that can easily be reconfigured into different seating environments is key. Furniture also needs to be more dynamic in its design. Sectionals with ledges along the back with stools promote group activities. Lounge chairs with tablet arms allow for easy laptop or tablet use and access to technology. Choosing the right furniture allows a space to flex into multiple experiences: study, play, stream, snack, team or converse.

A residence hall has always been a student’s home away from home, but today’s dorm room is far from just a place to sleep and meet friends in a TV lounge. Students today want to stay connected at all times with both technology and peers.

Creating flexible spaces that can be used for quiet study or group projects, depending on the focus, gives students the chance to personalize them in creative ways to suit the mood of occasion.

Within the Massachusetts Maritime Academy in Buzzards Bay, MA, residence hall students are encouraged to socialize with a variety of open lounges and social spaces. Varied seating allows students to have a formal study meeting and make notes at a whiteboard while others lounge by the windows, reading and overlooking the ocean. With truly quiet study space available at the library, the residence hall lounges are used for collaboration, a way for students to both work and relax with each other.



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Meet and greet. Looking into the round social and dining space of Chase Hall on the campus of Wheaton College, as seen from the central food service area. A chalkboard wall allows students to customize their space. High-top tables on the perimeter give an edge to the dining and give variety to the landscape.



PHOTOS © CHRISTOPHER HARTING

Take a seat. A variety of flexible, moveable furniture encourages interaction and supports comfort at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy.

INTERIOR EXPERIENCES DESIGNED ON A BUDGET: VALUE-ADDED DESIGN

One of the challenges of transforming interiors is the cost of high-end furnishings, lighting, fixtures and technology. As with all design, the goal is always to achieve the best possible outcome on budget and on schedule. Investing in future flexibility is key. Strategies for managing and reducing cost can be simple adjustments or alternatives, and yet add significant value over time.

- Create lighting patterns that allow control of both light levels and zones, making it easy to fine tune lighting to change a quiet zone into an impromptu event space.
- Large built-in pieces offer zero flexibility and become cumbersome to work around. Flexible, movable pieces offering a variety of seating styles provide something to please everyone and can be easily switched out as trends change.
- Use cost-effective materials in interesting ways. Standard vinyl flooring can be laid in colorful patterns to aid in circulation and add interest to a space. Hardwood flooring, considered a must-have by some, reveals its downside in its need for expensive and intrusive refinishing.
- Linear LED lights can be substituted for the usual 2-inch by 4-inch lay-in lights in standard acoustic ceiling tiles, with pendant lights used to accent key features of the space.
- Keep it simple. Use a classic neutral palette as a backdrop rather than splashy, trendy colors, but add the wow factor with patterns and a few focal pieces that make the space shine.

Welcoming students and faculty into well-designed, comfortable and flexible interiors is an important first-impression strategy. Whether for working, playing or living in, great spaces offer an opportunity for each individual to experience a campus in a variety of ways that will engage, surprise and delight.

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About the Author

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