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## Dorm\* Spaces and Sociability†

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### Abstract

*Physical spaces may significantly shape social interaction. This study has explored how the residential provisions (Dormitories) for students at IIM-Ahmedabad impact their social life. This paper adopted interpretive methods in order to explore the impact of physical space on sociability of students. Data was collected with the help of interviews and observations in order to explore and uncover the collective meaning imparted by the participants of research in understanding the impact of built spaces on sociability for the old campus and new campus dormitory residents of IIMA. Three narratives emerged from the collected data. First narrative focused on life in the dorm, second narrative focused on artifacts and how they influence the interaction among the students, and third narrative was built around the events in the dorm. Interpretive methods helped in drawing out participants' meanings related to spaces of the old and new campus dormitories and their impact on sociability. The study explored the lifeworld of dorm residents within these spaces. The study finds that built space and the organization of artifacts in that space do make a significant difference in social life of the dorm residents of IIMA.*

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\* Dorm is abbreviation for Dormitories

† The fieldwork for this study was carried out in early 2008

## Dorm Spaces and Sociability

### Introduction

Social life exists in physical space, but it is so commonplace an observation that often we don't take notice of how physical space shapes social life. We do come across situations where present organization of space does not serve the purpose it is expected to serve, if such obstruction of achieving purposes is very visible and tangible. Though same holds true for 'purpose-built' spaces but as that is less in the users' control we don't usually think about built spaces might be hindering or facilitating our purposes. Built spaces are at once storytellers and part of the story being told (Yanow, 1998, p. 215). And it is through built spaces that I seek to tell a story about sociability and designed spaces.

During my days in Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad (IIMA), when I was residing in a dorm as student, I noticed that some of the students from new campus dormitories were invariably present in my dorm that was in old campus. There is no norm but students often spent their free time in their own dorms, and this seemed like an anomaly that made me curious as to what it was that brought them to my dormitory. When asked, they shared their liking for my dorm compared to their own dorms as it was more friendly. This response gave way to the curiosity that why is such the case and I started looking for explanations. While there can be numerous explanations for the observed phenomena this study attempts to explore one.

The sprawling campus of IIMA is separated in two parts, old and new, divided by a public roadway, linked through an underpass. The old campus became functional in 1961, while the new campus started functioning in 2003-4. There is provision of student dormitories in both campuses. While the administrative system of the institute has made sure that the essential amenities are common among dormitories of both campuses, there are differences in architecture and presence of other physical artifacts. One of the major differences is between the physical settings of common spaces for student. This research aims to look at how built physical spaces within the dormitories have impacted sociability among students in old campus and new campus student dormitories of IIMA.

In the following sections, I have detailed the argument for need of interpretive method for this research by examining the substantive literature and epistemological stance of paper. The methodology section describes the access, and data collection methods. Based on the observations in the 'field', I have described the built space in detail. Later, three narratives are used to articulate the spaces and how they influence the sociability of dorm residents. The paper ends with a discussion on the contributions, and implication for organizational research.

### **Literature Review**

One way of recognizing the difference between social formation of different cultures is spatial order, i.e. the differences in the ways in which members of these societies live out their social existence (Hillier and Hanson, 1984). "The relationship between architecture and behavior exists within the broader framework of the relation between society and its spatial form. Design strategies within the former tend to be strongly influenced by changing ideas in the latter" (Hanson and Hillier, 1987:251).

Sime (1986) notes that architects design spaces while concentrating on the characteristics of the physical space, and may not pay attention to the activities and experiences those spaces are likely to cause for other people. He further claims that concept of place should encourage architectural theorists and environmental psychologists; to look behind the external appearance of built space into the meaning of the spaces behind walls (Sime, 1986). The concern of my argument is less with the distinct use of space and place and its meaning in the context used by Sime, but more with the notion of place suggested by him which can be created through built space if it done with the perspective of creating space.

Relph (1976:46) describes his model of place identity as, "...the static physical setting, the activities and the meanings – constitute the three basic elements of the identity of places. A moment's reflection suggests that this division, although obvious, is a fundamental one. For example, it is possible to visualize a town as consisting of buildings and physical objects, as is represented in aerial photographs. A strictly objective observer of the activities of people within this physical context would observe their movements

much as an entomologist observes ants, some moving in regular patterns, some consuming objects and so on. But, a person experiencing these buildings and activities sees them as far more than this – they are beautiful or ugly, useful or hindrances, home, factory, enjoyable, alienating, in short, they are meaningful.” Turner and Turner (2003) have noted that research on sense of place has usually focused on long-term inhabitants and meaning is derived from their experiences in these built spaces, which is also focus of this study.

### **Basis of Interpretive Work:**

Yanow, (2006), notes that methodological justifications for any research are related to the ontological and epistemological stance. “A researcher who presupposes that the social world is ontologically constructivist and epistemologically interpretive is more likely to articulate research questions that call for constructivist-interpretive methods.” (Yanow, 2006, p. 6). As can be noted in the question that is explored in this research, I attempt to uncover the collective meaning imparted by the participants of research (dorm residents) in understanding the impact of built spaces on sociability for the old campus and new campus dormitory residents of IIMA.

I have adopted interpretive methods to conduct this study to explore how people feel that physical space is influencing their sociability. Research in the past has attempted to understand how people respond to the built spaces where they spend short durations of time, e.g., hospital or airport terminals. Those studies have often used surveys to conduct such investigations (Yanow, 1998). In keeping with its philosophical presuppositions, researchers in this mode attempted to provide objective measures for what is, essentially, a subjective domain: the meaningful responses of specific humans to specific spaces in terms of the values, beliefs, and feelings they evoke. It is this subjective, meaning orientation that calls for interpretive research (Yanow, 1998, p. 216). I share this epistemological stance and have adopted interpretive methods for conducting this research.

Epistemological stance of this study presumes that knowledge is socially constructed. Interpretive research's orientation towards lifeworld is conducive toward the idea that, 'place grounds our subjective, embodied experience' (Malone, as cited in Yanow, 2006, p. 351). Present research takes this viewpoint and adopts ethnographic method to conduct the study, though executed in a very limited way due to time constraints.

The interpretive research approaches the causal relations in Sherlock Holmes's way of establishing causality, by carefully mapping the clues in context, a tracing of connections among events and participants (Schwartz-Shea, 2006). A similar approach was adopted in collecting the data and establishing the relation between built space and its impact of sociability by focusing on identification of all types of social spaces recognized within the dormitory and all types of interaction taking place between dormitory residents. And, observing the spaces and interactions happening on a first hand basis.

### **Methodology:**

In order to explore and uncover the collective meaning imparted by the participants of research in understanding the impact of built spaces on sociability for the old campus and new campus dormitory residents of IIMA, I adopted two methods for data collection, interviews and observations. The institute has 27 dormitories. Dormitories 1-18 are in the old campus and dormitories 19-27 are located in the new campus. Dormitory-14 and Dormitory-20 were selected to represent the old and new campus dormitories. The approach for accessing the dormitories for interviews with dorm residents was different in both cases. Being, an ex resident of dorm-14 made it easier for me to approach the dorm residents. In dorm-20, I interacted with dorm representative and he posted my request for interviews on the dorm's electronic notice board. Some students responded that they would be able to give me time and later we met for the interviews. Informed consents were taken from the dorm residents who were interviewed.

### **Methods of Data Collection: Interviews and Observations**

Overall 6 interviews were conducted 3 each in dorm-14 and dorm-20. In both dorms the selection of student was one from first-year of Post Graduate Program, one from second-

year of Post Graduate Program and one senior Fellow Program in Management (FPM) student. The second-year student selected for the interview was dorm representative in both the dormitories. Five one and a half hour long observations were done where attempt was made to look at the activities within the dormitory from a preselected spot. I spent two sets of 1 hour and 30 minutes in dorm-14 and three sets of 1 hour and 30 minutes in dorm-20 for observing behavior of participants. In dorm-20 the time was between 12:30am-2:00am and 10:00-11:30pm on January 31<sup>st</sup> and between 3:30-5:00pm on February 7<sup>th</sup>. In dorm-14 the time was between 2:30pm-4:00pm on January 31<sup>st</sup> of 2008 and 12:30am-2:00am on February 1<sup>st</sup> of 2008. Two half hour long observations were also done to locate social/common spaces within the dorm. This was done by walking around within and outside the dormitory.

### ***The representative themes in the interview***

Interviews were focused on three themes:

First theme focused on getting the information about spaces that dorm resident considers to be social or common space. Second theme focused on the nature of interaction that take place between dorm residents and mostly within the dorm spaces. Information was also collected about interaction between dorm students outside of the dorm spaces. Third theme was more specific in that it asked how the spaces influence the interaction between dorm residents. The question also explored role of physical artifacts placed in these spaces.

My interviews were focused on understanding the students' perception about the spaces that exist for interaction. Further, my interviewing also tried to get to their understanding related to the interactions. While interviewing attempt was made to determine a clear distinction between the interactions that qualified as interaction between dorm residents and interaction between friends within the dorm as aim of this paper was to look at how dorm spaces affect student interaction. While interviewing I also tried to identify with the students that what are possible reasons that interactions do not happen.

Soss (2006) has reflected that in-depth interviews usually follow a semi-structured or unstructured design and they may follow a conversational format. For the purpose of this study first interview held in both dormitories followed a structured format, while this gave all the desired information, it also restricted discussion of issues that could have been tangential spin offs of the main theme. This led to design of a new format for the remaining four interviews, in which the interview started with discussion around broad themes, and the raised issues were explored in a more flexible and free-conversational way.

### ***Focus of Observation***

Observations were focused on three things:

Discovering spaces within the dormitories: Focused on identifying the spaces that may be considered as social/common spaces within the dormitory. (This was done separately from the observation of interactions.

Interaction among students of the dormitories: I selected spots and observed the dormitory and activities happening within the dormitory from there.

How the dormitory relates to the external environment: The entrances and approachability of the dormitory. Interaction of spaces within the dormitory especially their accessibility and connectivity with the outside world.

While observing the dormitories I had few things in the back of my mind. I was attempting to look at the possible spaces, where two or more students can interact with each other. There was no dearth of such spaces in both dormitories of the new and old campus. In addition, I was also trying to look at the reasons that may hinder the interaction among students. I was looking for these reasons especially in the architecture of building, in the type of interactions I observed students engaging in. While taking the round of the selected buildings from outside I was considering the ease in accessing the building. Though unintended three out of five observation sessions happened in the night.



Night life on the campus is very active and is in no way suggests lack of observable actions.

## **Physical Setting**

### ***Dormitory 14***

Dorm 14 in the old campus is a four floor high building which is very close to a triangle in shape. The first, second and third floors are similar in shape, very much like a right angle triangle, two walls joining to form an L shape, and third wall facing the outside with large circles cut into it as a part of the design. These circles help in looking at the outside world. The staircase is like a semi circle cut inside this triangle. While walking on a floor one moves along the straight line and then takes the stairs ascending in semi-circular fashion. There are two open approaches for the inside landing space. Stairs seem to be the most obvious way out of the landing space. Exterior has finish of bare brick walls like the other buildings of old campus.

The ground floor has three rooms. One of the rooms which is comparatively bigger in area is turned into an office for FPM students. Third approach into the dorm opens into this hall used for FPM students' office purposes. The second enclosed room is used as a storage space. There is another room connected to it which is used for same purpose when the need arises. Third room remains locked all the time. On the first floor there are five rooms along one side of the L shape, the other side has open space. The open space has a newspaper table and shelves. Second and third floors have ten rooms. Five along each side of the L shape. The common space in the second floor has the printer connected to all the computers within the dormitory. Further, this space also has a newspaper stand and shelves. These are placed along the semi-circular wall running adjacent to the staircase. There are two blackboards placed along the walls of rooms. In addition, there is also a pantry on the floor. It is housed in a small closed room. Third floor has ten rooms exactly in the same configuration as the second floor. The common space facing the rooms here has a television set. In addition, there is newspaper stand and shelves. There are two blackboards placed along the walls.

### ***Dormitory-20***

Dormitory 20 is located in new campus. It is a four stories tall structure and square in shape. Entrances are located in the corners. In totality there are three entrances. Every floor of the dormitory has some difference in its configuration. On the ground floor, there is a square shaped foyer (popularly known as quadrangle). Two sides of the square has four rooms each for dorm residents. There are three sets of tables with benches. There is provision of a tall electric lamp close to each table. The main entrance to the dorm is located at the north-east corner of the building. Other two entrances are at the north-west and south-west corner. Only set of staircase is located near the north-east corner of the building along with a post-box hanging on a wall very close to it, giving it the status of main entrance. While climbing the stairs at every floor there is a wall barricading the view of the floor. Unless one reaches at the corners from outside, the building looks very enclosed. For the insiders' only way they can take a peek at the outside world is through the balconies of rooms, not provided in the ground floor rooms, or after coming out of the dormitory. Like other buildings of new campus it has cement colored exterior.

There are three set of four rooms along one side of the wall. The ground floor has only two such sets of rooms. One of the sides has a blank wall of one floor height. One side has a storage space belonging to some office of IIMA and the staircases. The first floor consists of four corridors. On three sides are the rooms and fourth side is a blank wall. The second floor has a common room, which is also known as the TV room. A Foosball table is also kept in the room. This floor also has a verandah like space with a blackboard. Top floor also has rooms on the same three sides like the first and second floor. As the common room has a two floor high ceiling. There is a smaller verandah like space with a blackboard.

### **Narratives about space and sociability**

Clair (2006) has shown the importance of exploring multiple narratives, the narrative thread, and the dialogue between narratives that are used to establish, sustain, and at times challenge the meaning of a community in her work. According to Bevir (2006) narratives explain actions and practices by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors.

Narratives used in this study attempt to show that how dorm residents see the interaction between spaces and sociability. Three narratives emerge from the collected data.

### **Life in the dorm**

First narrative is built around the interaction of dorm residents chatting and spending time among themselves within dormitory spaces or outside dormitories exhibiting the element of sociability. While identifying the social spaces within dorm-14 the participants identified the spaces outside the rooms as the primary space for social interactions. Area next to washing machine in the bathroom was also identified by one interviewee. Later dorm terrace was also identified as a space for social interaction. While talking about the dorm life residents of dorm-14 mentioned activities like going to mess together for lunch or dinner or going to campus gate for having a cup of tea. One interviewee of dorm-14 during the interview commented, “Here we don’t need reasons to go out of the rooms, just two three people come out and start chatting and three four more will join.” This suggests that dorm residents enter social space the moment they leave the room. Residents of dorm-20 mentioned following while identifying the social spaces within dorm. The ground floor foyer (quadrangle), TV room on second floor, open veranda type space with blackboard on second floor, dorm terrace and the corridors in front of rooms were identified as the common spaces. While talking about the how spaces may facilitate interaction in dorm-20 one interviewee mentioned that “You can talk across the balcony but somebody has to stop and stand there to acknowledge your conversation. Space does not facilitate unless somebody is willing to come out and talk. You don’t bump into people.” As there is line of sight because of facing balconies people talk across balconies (sometimes even from different floors) but this is an occasional phenomena. During the day or late into the night sometimes the neighbors come out and chat; smokers also find the balconies a good place to chat with each other while smoking. First-year students do spent a lot of time discussing things in the corridor space. This was further substantiated by a first-year interviewee.

### **Artifacts for interaction**

Second narrative is built around the presence of physical artifacts in the spaces and how they influence social interaction. While the nature of physical artifacts present in both dorms were different to some extent they were mentioned prominently by residents of both dorms as a reason for bringing people together. In dormitory-14 space outside the rooms were described using the prominent physical artifact on that floor, on the first floor near the newspaper stand, on second floor close to the printer and on the third floor close to the television set. During the interview, one of the dorm-14 resident suggested that, “I think that we should have more sports equipments because that increases interaction. You come out more to play, others also join.” Dorm-20 residents recognized Foosball table as a major physical artifact. They mentioned that presence of Foosball table in the TV room (Common room) is a major source of drawing dorm residents together. In the words of first year student, “We have a foosball table, where we meet, everyone, to play foosball. That is pretty much the centre of our dorm. We meet rather regularly over that.” Example of how physical artifacts can also discourage social interaction was also provided by one dorm-20 resident who said, “The space provided on the bottom floor for interaction is totally unused. I don’t know why its there and I don’t know why the benches are there. They are pretty dusty and no one sits there.” It was mentioned that absence of these benches could have provided more space for activities like playing cricket. This goes to show that presence of certain physical artifacts can play dual roles, while it can improve the interactions; it can also discourage interactions that may have happened more effectively it its absence.

### **Events in the dorm life**

Third narrative is built around dorm parties some of which are part and parcel of culture of the institute and some are more of dorm traditions related to practices of individual dorm. Several types of activities, especially parties were recognized as core for social interaction. Based on interviews, dorm 14 gave an impression that parties are frequently organized at dorm level, and while several of them are held inside the dorm, some also take place outside dorm where most of the dorm residents willingly participate. Parties like Birthday, Terrace, Pizza parties are celebrated inside the dorm where the

participation varies between 80 to 100 percent. All interviewees mentioned that Birthday parties are celebrated on the second floor common space. One interviewee mentioned that one or other kind of dorm party happens on a weekly basis. Parties at dorm level are not that common in dorm-20, one of the reasons as mentioned by some interviewees is its large size which prevents a very strong association among students at dorm level. But, residents of dorm-20 do go out in small groups exhibiting some sociability built within the dorm members. Terrace parties do happen in dorm-20 but they are not exclusive dorm parties but residents of other dorms are also invited. Interviews mentioned that whenever a birthday is celebrated that happens in the quadrangle. Like physical artifacts, some events were also recognized as causing more social bonding in dormitories, one dorm resident mentioned that, "Once in a year during Deepawali celebration we have some community bonding happening." This was mentioned while describing the social spaces within dorm and discussing quadrangle on the ground floor and how it influences social interaction.

### **Conclusion and Contribution**

Following the interpretive method helped in deriving a sense that how in old and new campus dormitories the residents consider the relation between space and its impact on sociability with the help of observation and interaction with them. The study explored the lifeworld of dorm residents within these spaces and did not only focus on how they respond to the built spaces. Built space and the organization of artifacts in that space do make a difference in social life of the dorm residents.

Creation or reorganization of spaces in the institutional setting and use of physical artifacts can play an important role in building sociability. This in turn may lead to other desirable behaviors (information sharing, network building etc.) among the constituents of the community (employees, students, members etc.). Research on space and how it impacts sociability and other desirable behaviors can pave a path for future research that can help areas like management, psychology and architecture.

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