Metropolitan Warehouse Student Advisers' Report

A Compilation of MIT Community Feedback and Recommendations

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Introduction

Overview

The Metropolitan Warehouse Project Student Advisors (Met student advisors) were convened in the spring semester of the 2014-2015 academic term to serve as liaisons between the undergraduate student body and other stakeholders in the MIT residential life system. The committee has grown to include representation from the Dormitory Council (DormCon), Inter Fraternity Council (IFC), Panhellenic Association (Panhel), and the Undergraduate Association (UA). This paper serves as the preliminary report from this advisory group to the designers.

Methodology

The Met student advisors sought feedback from as many undergraduates at MIT as possible. In particular, we aimed to receive feedback from students who lived in residence halls with physical aspects similar to those included in the Metropolitan plans. To reach the overall student body while maintaining this focus, we set out on a series of talking tours. These tours included an hour and a half long feedback session in each of MIT's undergraduate dormitories. There were also numerous conversations with members of the fraternity and sorority system and a feedback session open to all undergraduates. Overall, feedback was collected from over 150 undergraduate students, with a majority of those living in a residence hall.

Building Walk Through

Structure of Building

One of the most common, and likely most pressing, concerns from undergraduates is the ratio of residential space to public space. This residence hall, unlike any other residence hall at MIT, consists of nearly 50% public space open to the general MIT community. While this setup does have benefits for undergraduates, it takes away ownership from the residents and turns their home into an additional student center. This could have detrimental impacts on students, particularly freshmen, as they attempt to transition into the space and learn to call it their own. Additionally, it sends an unfortunate message to the residents of this building that they are not the priority of the building or the building staff, but rather a second thought.

Residential Space

Light Shafts

The light shafts raised a large number of concerns amongst the student body. Residents of MacGregor Hall and Simmons Hall, which have rooms with large walls made almost entirely of windows, worried that the rooms would be very cold during the winter because of the poor insulation of glass. Questions were raised as to whether all or parts of a room could open into the light shaft, for many believe that being able to open and shut one's window is an extremely important aspect of a livable space. There were also concerns about students simply having a view of a shaft and an adjacent hallway and the impact that may have on student mental health.

Many students were concerned about whether the shafts would have coverings with students responding both that the shafts should and should not be covered. Some respondents indicated that an open shaft would allow for residents to have a feeling of openness to nature and to see weather

patterns, such as the rain, snow, or sun pouring in. They indicated that these changes might ameliorate some of the concerns surrounding mental health. However, other students pointed out that open shafts might provide for dangerous conditions, particularly if students could climb to the top of the shafts.

The majority of respondents also feel strongly that the courtyard at bottom of each light shaft should be made accessible to residents by doorways on the second floor. This dorm has no usable outdoor space, and it is believed that the courtyards at the bottom of light shafts should fill this need. These spaces should be filled with various outdoor seating and/or plants, preferably to be decided at the dorm residents' discretion. It is believed that if the bottoms of light shafts are not accessible to residents, they will take less ownership over the space and they may become extremely dirty, especially if windows open into them. By allowing for courtyards to be accessible to students, respondents not only believe the need for outdoor space to be filled, but also think that human activity in a nearby courtyard would help with the mental health of students who do not have a direct view of the world outside the dorm.

Kitchens

Nearly every student surveyed stated that the residence hall is lacking in kitchens. While there were students who agreed that the country kitchen is the best possible option for the dorm, all respondents questioned said that the country kitchen was too small for the number of residents. A plurality of students indicated that the dormitory should have either individual suite kitchens or, at the very least, kitchens on each floor. Kitchenettes in suites could satisfy these needs and might be preferable to a single, larger kitchen. It should also be noted that students feel that having accessible sinks throughout the dormitory is very important for livability. A large proportion of those surveyed, especially in dormitories with dining halls, indicated that kitchens help foster community and act as a social space. We have also found that students feel that they are more empowered to live healthy lives and to eat well when they have the opportunity to prepare food for themselves. Providing useable, easily accessible kitchens increases this opportunity. Without the addition of more kitchens, we remain concerned that this residence hall will contribute to a culture of unhealthy living.

Bathrooms

The lack of bathrooms on each floor concerned students in each residence hall that we visited. Currently each floor only has two single-sex bathrooms, meaning that approximately fifty students will share each bathroom. In dormitories where the ratio is closer to 8 students to a bathroom, students shared that they have had difficulty accessing the bathroom in a timely fashion especially in the mornings before classes. This could lead to additional stress in students lives as well as tensions between students sharing the bathroom.

Additionally of concern is that the bathrooms are currently designed to be single-sex. MIT has a long standing history of being accepting and accommodating to students of all paths of life, including those who do not choose to adhere to heteronormative conventions. In keeping with this tradition, a majority of MIT's dorms have moved to neutral-gender bathrooms. By making the Metropolitan bathrooms single-sex, MIT is ignoring the population of students who not only desire, but in many instances require, neutral gender bathrooms.

Laundry Rooms

The size of the laundry room came up as a primary concern in every feedback session. Many of the dormitory presidents that we spoke with told us that, at ratios of approximately 30 students per washer, the laundry systems present in residence halls now is inadequate for the needs of students. We believe that the ratio in Metropolitan will be far worse, around 50 students per washer, and will lead to an exacerbation of the problem that are currently seen in MIT's other residence halls.

The current location of the laundry room was also seen as very inconvenient by nearly all students we talked to, as most people using it would have to walk down the entirety of the hallway and through the gym to reach it, while carrying their clothes. Furthermore, if the west elevator is not accessible to residents, the inconvenience of the location would be significantly increased. Additionally, concerns about the noise level of the laundry room were raised given its proximity to one suite.

Outdoor Patios

The majority of students suggested that the outdoor patios be able to be enclosed as otherwise they would be virtually unusable during the winter months or during poor weather. This would be especially problematic for

the central two suites, which would otherwise have no direct access to a lounge space without passing through the balcony. Many students responded positively to the idea of some outdoor space being available for the dorm residents. Some students, however, wondered if there was more than would be actually used and thus if it was an ideal use of the limited space available.

Stairwells

The layout of stairwells appears to not be ideal given the absence of centrally located stairwells and the length of the building. Students surveyed complained that it would be inconvenient moving from the center of one floor to another without a central stairwell. Staircases in the central residential common areas alleviate this somewhat, but there is no connection between the second and third floors or between the fourth and fifth floors. Adding this would improve the flow of people through the building and help to increase the usage of the central common areas and thus a larger sense of community in the dormitory.

Suite Layout

The current layout of suites does not appear to be the most effective for facilitating the development of small, supportive communities for students. The current suite lounges are very small and lack access to natural light. They currently do not appeal to students surveyed as a place to spend free time or socialize. One suggestion that was repeatedly brought up was to switch the room closest to the hallway in a suite with the lounge, giving the lounge more light from the light well as well as more foot traffic from the main hallway. If the current layout is kept, the majority of students believe that there are too many doors between the main hallway and the suite, and that the door to the lounge should be removed. Replacing the door to the main hallway with a sliding door was also suggested as a way to more easily manage to privacy and foot traffic.

In terms of room types, many students were concerned that triples have a tendency to develop into a two versus one scenario, and would prefer for the floor plans to include fewer triples. This could be counteracted by adding more quads and singles - students overwhelmingly felt that singles within a suite would provide similar mental health benefits to having a roommate.

Floor Layout

Initial discussions within the Advisory Group included how to build rings of community within the dorm, from the suite level up to the whole-dorm level. At this current stage of design, many students feel that there are not enough spaces or layouts conducive to an intermediate community between suites (~10 people) and floors (~100 people). Adding lounge spaces for each side of the floor was suggested many times as a way to allow communities of ~50 people to form.

Similarly, students and graduate resident tutors (GRTs) that we spoke to agreed that the current locations of GRT apartments do not allow for natural GRT sections to be formed, as two apartments are located on one half of the floor and one is on the other half. Evenly distributing GRTs throughout each floor could create more obvious GRT sections as well as create smaller communities within each floor.

Lastly, the majority of students felt that there is currently too much focus on vertical integration of the floors, especially through the differences in designated lounge/study spaces on each residential floor (large lounge on 2nd floor versus two smaller study rooms on 5th floor, for example). Students in dorms with the potential for vertical integration, such as Burton Conner, felt strongly that their main communities are on their floor and that attempts to create vertical communities by connecting suites on different floors with stairwells were unsuccessful. Providing similar common spaces on each floor was agreed to be preferred to vertical integration, as it has a better chance of bringing people together.

MIT Community Space

Dining Hall

The dining hall received both positive and negative feedback from the community. Student respondents appreciated that the design allows for variety in food choice and availability. They also responded particularly positively to the idea of the seating space being open as a common area for dorm residents during non-dining hours. Most respondents said that they believed residents should be able to access the dining hall directly through both floors floors, especially if the seating area is meant to be open to residents outside of dining hours. However, there were concerns about the accessibility of the dining hall for students with handicaps or disabilities as the two floor layout with no seating on the bottom floor is extremely handicap inaccessible. The

logistics around carrying food up and down stairs, getting second helpings of food, needing to use the restroom, and the possibility that students would not feel a need to clean their dishes were other concerns brought up.

The biggest concern brought forth by the majority of respondents was the public nature of the dining hall and its placement. Overall, students respond negatively to the dining hall's location on the third and fourth floors. Many students enjoy the privileges and privacy that their dining halls provide by being located on the first floor of their buildings. Because the dining hall is open to the MIT community, many people feel that at the very least the entrance and servery of the dining hall should be placed on the first floor.

Makerspace

The addition of a makerspace to campus was widely appreciated, particularly by students studying engineering. However, a number of large concerns did arise surrounding the makerspace. Students were concerned about the possibility of noise traveling outside of the makerspace. Students living near the makerspace might have to cope with frequent loud noise from other students utilizing the equipment, particularly late at night. This may make it difficult for them to sleep or study in their residence and imposes an undue burden on them. Secondly, students reported that the maker space being accessible between midnight and five a.m. made them uncomfortable as it may further exacerbate the culture of sacrificing sleep for work.

Auditorium

Many students commented that the inclusion of the auditorium over additional residential space further indicated that residents were not the primary priority of the dormitory. The student advisers believe that, given the need for additional beds on MIT's campus and the high density of the Metropolitan dormitory, that this space should instead be reallocated to residents.

"The Bar"

The Bar was the most popular aspect of the public spaces. Students appreciated that it could be used both as a place to study and socialize and found that its presence next to a large window would make it a particularly good place to study. A student suggestion was that a small coffee shop be operated (perhaps even by students) on the 6th floor could become a significant draw to studying/working at the Bar.

Study Spaces

The sixth floor study spaces received mixed reviews. Some students felt that the space would simply become an annex to the student center's fifth floor reading room. Others felt that MIT is currently lacking in accessible study spaces outside of the library system. It is the view of the student advisers that some study space is necessary within the building, but that too much of the Metropolitan Warehouse has been allocated to study spaces for the general MIT population, at the expense of study spaces for the residents only.

Many students believed that the permanently programmed spaces on the sixth floor would go under-utilized as they cannot be customized to fit individuals' or groups' needs. Rather than specifying what specific spaces should be used for, we recommend forgoing permanent setups and instead replacing them with modular furniture that can fit multiple needs.

Security

An over-abundance of security upon the single main entrance and a lack of security in the transitions from the public to the residential spaces were the greatest security concerns of the undergraduates surveyed. Students felt that the possibility of a security desk and turnstiles at the entrance to the building would be overkill. They also felt that there were not enough safeguards to prevent non-residents from entering the residency from the public spaces on the third and sixth floors. There were particular concerns about the possibility of people following residents out through the resident-only door in the dining hall.

Students also expressed concern of the inability to enter the building through the west side. It is imperative to students that there be a west side entrance for residents, particularly the residents living in the west side of the building. As the building's people dynamics are currently structured, students were extremely concerned about the following problem: if you live on the east side of the building, many people will pass by your room/lounge and you are likely to have constant social interactions and form a community. However, if you live on the west side, you are unlikely to see very many people at all. To that end, adding an entrance on the west side would increase traffic through the west half of the building, and also increase the utilization of many of the public spaces on the west side. Lastly, it would dramatically increase convenience for students who wanted to enter/leave their dorm and head westward. This entrance could modelled after existing

secondary entrances in existing dorms like Simmons, Random, and Burton Conner.

Retail Space

The retail space on the east side of the first floor is an intriguing concept for respondents. As long as this space is only accessible by entrances on the first floor along Vassar Street or Massachusetts Avenue, many students feel neutrally about the use of this space by a vendor. Students would prefer this vendor to be one that augments existing vendors in the area and provides services not already offered in the near vicinity. Additionally, this vendor should be one that allows for students to buy their products and then stay and relax in the space. Students particularly do not want the space to be used as an MIT/Harvard COOP.

Recommendations

- Move the dining hall to the 1st & 2nd floor, or just the 1st floor
- If two floor design is kept, consider placing part of the servery area to the top floor in order to allow for seating on the bottom floor
- Each resident's room should have a window opening into the light shaft
- Allow for the courtyards at the bottom of each light shaft to be accessible to students through entrances on the second floor
- Evenly space GRT apartments throughout the floors
- Increase the ratio of residential space to MIT community space
- Increase the ratio of communal residential space to number of rooms
- Add another bathroom to each floor such that there are three bathrooms evenly spaced throughout each residential floor
- Leave the bathrooms unspecified as to whether they are single sex or gender neutral, and allow the residents of each floor to decide
- Add more quads and singles and remove the majority of triples
- Place a small coffee shop on the 6th floor
- Add a second, unstaffed entrance on the west end of the building
- Move common spaces and suite lounges into critical paths
- Decrease the amount of programmed space and improve the customizability of study spaces
- Add a full kitchen to each floor
- Place small "kitchenettes" (sink, refrigerator, microwave) in suite lounges
- Increase the size of the laundry room and consider moving it to a more central location or add a second laundry room on the opposite end of the building
- Ensure staircases are in the finalized design of the central residential common areas
- Enclose the outdoor balconies
- Avoid overdoing security systems on the first floor
- Increase security provisions between public spaces and residential spaces