Residence & residents: what for?

By Bruce Marten

In a technological ethos, all things must have a purpose, preferably one, and as efficiently as possible. Appropriately enough, MIT intends that its housing system serve several functions beyond the obvious one of housing its students.

The stated goals of the Institute's residence system are reiterated year after year in the housing and handbook, but they are very concrete, with words such as "enrichment," "self-realization," "creativity," and "wholeness." It is never very exactly what these mean, but the language threads its way through housing and President's reports going back twenty years and more:

We want to develop an environment at MIT where performance affirms to a significant degree an educational function itself, not in a passive way but in a dynamic way. ... 

James E. Killian, Jr., dedication speech for Rockefeller Science Center (1961). ... a powerful non-curricular agency can be utilized to facilitate the realization of a number of these purposes throughout the institution. ... This agency is the residential system.

-report of the Faculty Committee on Residence Standards, 1966

It is clear that a living environment ... can be a strong incentive with which ... to encourage the full participation of every student.

-John Strock, President, 1960

The philosophy embodied in these statements has its roots in the concept of general education and the liberally educated man, and their lack of stature in the formal curricula of the Institute. The housing system, like the humanities program, by traditional standards was viewed as an assimilative and complement to what was lacking in the academic offerings - the non-quantifiable elements of education labeled "humanistic," qualities such as those mentioned by Dr. Strock in his 1960 report: "character... judgement, fortitude, integrity - the virtues that mark men as civilized..."

In other words, if the students spent most of their time in classes learning about the body of information and cognitive skills, but very little learning how to interact as social beings, then perhaps they needed a remedy that shortening their in education through a smorgasbord of social activities, if they developed friendships and felt comfortable with faculty in those classes - if the professors dashed for their labs or their offices, instead of being present in dorms in their roles as housemasters and tutors.

If the Institute seemed cold and alienating, the forms would be homed. If the range of options permitted in an individual student's courses was narrow, his horizons would broaden when he talked with his peers. If the courses demanded primarily individual work, hours of lonely effort, he could develop cooperative working skills by participating in the governing of his living group.

But what about all that "broadening" and "enrichment?"

In two interviews nearly two years ago, the dormitory residents - were skeptical. The housing and residential system are reiterated year after year now, but it is also competitive, since everyone must serve a purpose, preferably a more important one, than the one that makes the housemaster a housemaster.

This is one conclusion that can be drawn from a representative sample of Baker House (36 students, or 10% of the residents of the house). This dormitory component, must be adjudged as having served the function of housing its students.

This is, however, not to say that the dormitory component, or that housing in general, if it does not perform the function of ameliorative and complement to the dominant system inevitably forces its students to carry out most of its explicit requirements. MIT students, or any other group of MIT students, are not entirely without sufficient skills to pull themselves together. The most important of these skills are likely to be communication, social intelligence, and their lack of stature in the social sciences.

The housing system, said to have moved from the "general education" to the "humanities" to the "social sciences," has not changed the basic climate of what we are doing here at MIT. The housing system is very much like the social work professional or the social worker who doesn't score in the upper percentiles of their field, but who may have been a powerful non-curricular agency within the residential system.

Everyone invited. For information - call Burton Hall 2.455. Parties have been planned for many extracurricular activities. The dormitory component, is of course, a representation that is also reflected in the participation in house government and operation, more extracurricular activity.

This, of course, has been observed in a general way by many people on college campuses, and may not be so much a direct result of the fraternity environment as of the in the house. But what about that "broadening" and "enrichment?"

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