Robert E. Malchance

Home is where the hot water runs

Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education.

—Sir Francis Bacon

AUX-EN-PROVENCE, France—When the young men call you a university dormitory, there is a hot water run six hours a day, where the kitchen consists of two hot plates, muddy daily students' rooms at ungodly hours to purchase the mission of eating the thrill, and where the concept of "hot water" is unknown? Would you call it "primitive," "barbaric," "perverse," "Harridan"? I would call it "French."

I will never again clients a petty irritation after experiencing the privations attention to the freshmen dining hall. It is a place where every room is a coffin single. The building looks like a 1960's housing project where the money ran out. The only redeeming feature is that the front rooms look over a beautiful valley with mountains in the distance and back rooms, on the other hand, look into the side of a hill.

The students clearly respect their environment: Whatever consumable trash escapes the clutches of the maids is promptly pitched out the window so that no more cadavers will die in their environment. Whatever makes it particularly difficult was the fact that everyone had to stop and look into the "Temple of Athena" area in the old Medical Center, even though nothing was hooked up yet. It appeared that everyone was curi-ous about what strange things might soon happen.

There has been more talk by students about Project Athena than usual for a new Institute program. The Whithead Institute, the new Arts and Media Center, and the new Whitaker buildings are not of great concern to the average undergraduate. Project Athena is.

Most students are worried about the bad effects of Athena — will they have to spend their lives in grungy terminal rooms, or will the forces of good and right prevail, and make MIT into a paradise of text editing and spreadsheet? Or could something new and unexpected evolve out of the combination of plentiful hardware and clever programs?

Some people have thought a bit beyond the limits of what is common for micro- and mini-computers. There has been talk of "expert" systems to help Joe Average. Project Athena is an attempt to present the monopo-lization of information by the rich-in-computers and scientists and engineers accustomed to using computers as means to an end. The Community Memory Project is a group in the San Francisco Bay Area which is putting up coin-operated terminals on tele-phone poles, in bars and in laun-dromats. Everyone will have ac-cess for only 25 cents to a city-wide electronic bulletin board. No one can use the system with a private terminal; everyone has the same level of access to the bul-letin board. The Community Mem-ory Project is a small attempt to present the monopo-lization of in-formation by the rich-in-computers and scientists and engineers accustomed to using computers as means to an end.

Eventually, many of its plan-ners foresee a day when one can take a course as easily as checking out a book. When "text-books" that can teach, instead of being taught from, are available, the opportunities for self-education will be endless. In five or ten years, as powerful computers be-come less expensive, there is no reason a high school or a college could not offer subjects that none of its teachers are qualified to teach.

A crucial issue has been un-gratefully glossed-over in all of the public discussions of Project Athena: the licensing of Athena-developed software. Will MIT make progress or money with Athena's software? As Simson L. Garfinkel pointed out a couple of weeks ago, the computer soft-ware business is lucrative, but it is not MIT's role to pursue only the lucrative. I keep seeing blurbs and advertisements about new products invented by this team of MIT professors or that group of PhD's. This is not MIT's role to pursue only the profitable. MIT should advance the use of computers in education. Just as the Community Memory Project has attempted to provide computer information systems to everyone, MIT should try to promote the use of computer information systems to everyone. MIT is a real opportunity to make this happen.