Authors Note: In the first and second quarter of 2013, I met with some architects and owners to discuss the trends in student housing. I have coupled these discussions with what we have seen in the housing projects recently completed, and what is currently being developed by colleges and universities. I also have developed impressions from recent research focused on student housing development trends from articles in various publications.

Student Housing trends today are not much different from what they were 5+ years ago. There have been some shifts in how projects are delivered and financed, but the type of housing being built has not drastically changed. The amount of renovation underway has been steady or rising. There are a few reasons for this:

- Renovations are less costly and with tight budgets, this makes renovations more feasible.
- The housing stock built between 1950 and 1980 is at or near the end of its useful life so those buildings need renovation or replacement.
- Residence halls are a major selling point for attracting students, so institutions must upgrade their freshman dorms to ensure competitiveness.
- A large wave of students that will increase demand for housing.

Configurations

The configuration of student housing units plays a large role in the schedule, budget feasibility and attractiveness to college students. Various layouts, amenities and floor plans are available to achieve the desired outcome.

Suites, apartments, and double-loaded corridors

The model of “transitional living” continues – freshmen start in traditional residence halls and through their four years, students move from suites to apartments. This not universal, we have seen a steady trend to build suites over double-loaded corridors, and more apartments for upper classmen. We have seen projects at more conservative schools and / or Ivy League schools that stay with their traditional housing models. In general however, students are demanding more space, more amenities, and more privacy. As a compromise to provide privacy in a double-loaded corridor setting, some new “freshman style” residence halls are being built like hotels, with a bathroom in the room as opposed to shared toilet facilities down the hall. This configuration has an added benefit that the residence hall can be used in the summers for conferences or other events by visiting adults who would not accept communal bathrooms. Suite-style buildings tend to have various sized suites and mixes of singles and doubles. Apartment-style buildings also have various sized units ranging from studio apartments to as many as six beds. Usually the apartment-style units are all single bedrooms, but we have seen one example of apartments designed for doubles.

In some cases we have seen hybrid buildings that include one style of rooms on some floors and other configurations on separate levels. These hybrids often have a mix of singles and doubles to some degree. These buildings offer the school greater flexibility for assignments and use over the years.

Bathroom configurations and ratios seem to vary widely. We have seen units with the sinks outside the toilet / shower room, showers and toilets in separate rooms with the sink in one or the other, and any combination of this. Ratios range from 1 shower or toilet per 1 student, or 1:1, to as high as 1:10, but usually it seems to be in the 1:4 to 1:6 range.

Total residence hall construction over the last 11 years exceeded $35 billion.

65% of students will have individual bathroom facilities or share with just one other.

Students, and parents, are demanding a higher quality look and feel of the residence halls. Privately developed projects may look like the home the students.

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Size
The square footage per bed has been rising over the years as social spaces, classrooms, and other program spaces are added to the buildings. Buildings with 325 to 400 square feet per student are not uncommon. Compared to older double loaded corridors of the 50’s and 60’s at under 200 square feet per bed, this is quite a change.

There have been a couple of cases we have seen that may indicate a new trend. A school may build less square feet per bed, to provide less amenity spaces in order to provide basic housing at the lowest possible cost. The configurations are still following the trend for transitional living, but with the cost of education rising in general, the price point of housing can be important to a potential student.

Student Housing Supervision
There do not seem to be changes in the allocation of space in the buildings for hall directors or residence assistants (RAs). Most schools have professional hall directors and for them they provide 1, 2, or even 3 bedroom apartments to allow for families. In general it seems that there is a hall director for about every 500 students. Ratios of residence hall assistants to students are smaller in upper-class residence halls. RAs typically have singles.

Renovation Challenges
Many of these projects are challenging because the conversion of the double-loaded corridor with gang bathrooms into what the market demands now – smaller bathrooms or even private bathrooms and suites – can be difficult for the older buildings.

Renovations are also a challenge because most schools cannot take beds off-line for more than a summer. The construction of “enabling” or swing space may be required. The renovations of residence halls over one or two summers is an alternative, but those are intense efforts that come with a cost premium.

Old-style double-loaded corridors are problematic for reuse. The layout is usually hard to change because of the structural systems, so schools tend to renovate these to be used as traditional freshman housing stock. When done, the bathrooms tend to be completely reconfigured to meet code requirements, allow for more privacy, and to distribute male and female facilities. This often leads to some loss of beds in a facility.

Adding elevators, social spaces and other amenities to a renovated building also tend to lead to a loss of beds, so many of these projects include an addition that contains these spaces. These additions tend to be packed with relatively expensive program spaces, so the budgeting of these needs to take this into account.

The creation of informal social spaces during the redesign of an existing floor plan is also very important in residence halls. Enabling students to get together outside of their rooms is seen as critical to the development of students and to enhancing their residential life experience.

Quality
Students and parents are demanding a higher quality look and feel of the residence halls. Concrete Masonry Unit (CMU) walls and plain finishes are not acceptable to students. However, how this is delivered varies from project to project. Privately developed projects may look like the home the students came from, but below the surface the durability of institutional construction is often not there. This
is a constant push / pull in the decision-making by schools on public / private / partnership deals, and is affected by the general pressures to keep project costs down. They have to look good, and the schools want them to be easy to maintain and last a long time, but these goals may be difficult to achieve at the same time.

Features

Owners are looking for designs that allow them to build communities within the buildings, including features like large game / TV rooms, computer centers, larger lounges with kitchens that students can use for special events, large and small study lounges, fitness centers and other gathering spaces in the buildings. Some remotely located buildings are being built with dining halls, fitness/weight rooms, classrooms, snack bars, and the like.

The amenities being added vary depending on the housing type and location relative to other campus facilities. For instance apartment- or suite-style housing may include a grab-and-go convenience store. Some will include ATMs and classrooms. Urban facilities may have a larger rentable space on the ground floor for things like a laundry or a retail food outlet.

Some building projects include parking either as an expansion of lots or as part of the structure. For sustainable design reasons, many campuses are limiting parking and cars in the core of the campus and are implementing more shuttles around the campuses.

Security

Most schools have fully embraced the use of card access security systems, and is quickly becoming the standard across all campuses, except for smaller dormitories. Some campuses use them for the main entry doors and other campuses use them even further for entry into individual suites. The majority do not use cards to enter individual bedrooms and still use keys or electronic combination locks.

CCTV installations are growing but the extent varies depending on location and the culture of the school. Some do not use cameras because the students may not tolerate them as an invasion of privacy. Usually cameras are found at the exterior of buildings and at the entrances. From there, the use varies, however, more campuses are beginning to use internal cameras showing who among the residents and visitors went room to room.

Incidents around the country are pushing schools to take more proactive stances on security, so the use of these systems and other warning / notifications systems is increasing.

Sustainability

On sustainability, most schools are requiring the equivalent of USGBC® LEED silver and often have higher goals. Not all are paying for certification. The key focus is on lowering operating costs through the use of more efficient HVAC and electrical systems. Water conservation may be driven more by location, cost of water and availability, than by sustainable goals.
Air conditioning is becoming more common across the country and is a requirement for schools in the warmer climates. We have seen systems ranging from Variable Refrigerant Flow systems to inexpensive stacked fan coils to VAV systems. The funding source may be an influence on this. An emphasis on lower operating costs and LEED certifications makes most schools want to use highly efficient systems, if they can afford the initial capital cost.

**Tel-data**

The infrastructure of the tel-data systems in the buildings continues to expand. A typical room has at least two ports per student in it now, plus wireless routers around the buildings. This adds cost and square footage to any building. Contributing to this may be a trend to have students take some portion of their classes online. This lowers the cost of providing a degree in various ways. This “hybrid” education may create new demands on residence halls, though it has impacts on construction of general classroom spaces across campuses.

**Retail**

Retail in residence halls tends to be focused solely on student-supported vendors. These spaces include fast food, convenience stores, laundries, phone stores, tiny bank branches (or even just an ATM), and the like. Barriers to other businesses are mostly related to location. Dormitories do not tend to be on busy retail stretches of road and parking is usually very tough on campuses so stop in and shop opportunities are prevented. If a school wants to add retail space to the program, they must ensure the business model is built on realistic retail traffic expectations.

**Financing Models**

If a project is going for private financing, the banks may look for alternative uses for the project. A traditional double-loaded corridor residence hall may not get private financing because the school occupancy fails to fill the building and there is no other use. Hotel-style rooms may offer other uses, which may enhance the financing options.

The cost of capital is a driver in this market now. One public university told Gilbane that as long as they have bond capacity, they will build the projects themselves because the cost of money is so low right now. Today they can get more building than they might in a design-build finance scenario. The key here is having the capacity to get financing. Many institutions are unable to secure financing and will continue to support the use of design-build finance developments for residence halls.

**Dining**

New residence halls on campus will create demand at the dining halls. Many new buildings will include these in the program. Typically a campus will incorporate one or two small “grab and go” services in the building with no dining area or kitchen. Students who want more can go to the central dining facilities. This is less costly, and to some extent meets the lifestyle of the students.
Summary

With a few exceptions the trends in housing construction remain consistent with what we have seen in the past 10 years. There is still a demand for housing growth on campuses, but the cost of education is conflicting with the expectations of some students for amenities and features in their residence halls. This also can conflict with the desire by schools to build highly efficient and durable buildings. Renovations continue to take advantage of solid though older housing stock by altering layouts to some degree and by enhancing the exteriors of older buildings. Alternative delivery methods are being used in some cases to provide financing for cash strapped schools which still need the facilities.

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Additional Sources: