

Architecture of experience

May 3 2012, By Paul Massari



Former Quincy House resident Tuan Ho '09 was going to be a doctor but then invented Tivli, a way to stream TV programming over a broadband Internet connection. Med school would wait, to Ho's parents' chagrin. Luckily, Quincy House Masters Lee and Deb Gehrke had run into this situation before, as had the House's business and pre-med tutors. Along with friends and classmates, the Quincy advisers helped Ho through an at-times rocky transition. Credit: Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard Staff Photographer

Krystal Tung '13 wanted to follow the yellow brick road. When the Cabot House resident heard that this spring's House musical would be "The Wizard of Oz," she headed straight for the stage.

"I've always wanted to be in a musical," said Tung, who became a munchkin in the show. "I've never had any formal acting [experiences](#) or singing lessons. But my friends in the House were doing it, so I decided to take that risk and see what happens."

Tung, a psychology concentrator, spent hours learning her lines, rehearsing in the chorus, and building sets. She also learned how to get people organized, listening, and working together. Those are useful skills for her other passion, entrepreneurship, which she discovered when she went to Cabot's resident dean and House master for advice. Tung credits her residential community for providing outlets to explore new interests and express herself in fresh ways.

“I don't think I would have gotten this opportunity outside of the House, because then I would have had to audition for the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club productions, where they expect you to have years and years of experience.”

For Tung and nearly all of her Harvard College classmates, the place where she lives is also the place where she explores, creates, connects, and, above all, learns. That's because the College's distinctive House system brings faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates together under one roof in smaller communities that encourage residents to develop as people as well as scholars. According to recent research, such living and learning communities also generate a host of benefits for students, including an improved academic experience and increased wellness.

“The House system at Harvard binds the academic and the intellectual with the other important aspects of our students' lives: creative expression, career exploration, relationships, health, and wellness,” said Dean Michael D. Smith of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), who is also the John H. Finley Jr. Professor of Engineering and Applied Sciences. “Much of the learning that undergraduates do at the College happens in the Houses, where they meet people different from themselves and engage with new knowledge and new ideas. It is their initiation into the fellowship of educated men and women.”

As Harvard looks to the future, it is also working on renewing the House system for 21st century students. The College will take the first step in that process later this month when construction begins on a test project to update the living and learning experience at Old Quincy House. Planners will try out design concepts and learn lessons that can be applied to future test projects, and, when financial resources allow, to renewing the entire system.

Bringing the University down to size

The vision of President A. Lawrence Lowell (1909-33), the House system got its start in 1929. Lowell envisioned English-style college residences that would encourage intellectual conversation between peers and their instructors that “so far as it exists ... supplements and enhances formal instruction.” He also wanted to bring upperclassmen into close contact with younger students to aid “in the development of their mind, body, and character.” Lowell believed that undergraduate education would improve with smaller learning communities.

“The plan makes possible more personal attention to the individual,” he wrote in his report on the 1928-29 academic year.

By 1931, the original seven undergraduate Houses — Adams, Lowell, Eliot, Kirkland, Leverett, Winthrop, and Dunster — were up and running. In the decades that followed, the College added Quincy, Mather, Cabot, Currier, Pforzheimer, and Dudley as well.

In 2009, Harvard’s Subcommittee on House Life updated Lowell’s vision and described a House as “a community that cares primarily for its members’ academic and personal well-being,” with a central goal of fostering “intellectual, academic, advising, civic, recreational, social, and cultural activities.” In today’s House community, faculty masters provide intellectual capital and leadership. Allston Burr

Resident Deans see to the well-being of students and help to create and implement a vision for House life. And graduate student tutors provide mentoring and academic advising.

Harvard College Dean Evelyn M. Hammonds, the Barbara Gutmann Rosenkrantz Professor of the History of Science and of African and African American Studies, said the modern House system is designed to bring the University down to size and put it literally at a student's doorstep.

“Harvard is a big place,” she said. “Houses bring important aspects of the University to students in a way that is manageable and accessible. Undergraduates learn from some of the world's leading scholars, encounter classmates who come from an astonishing diversity of backgrounds, form relationships that last a lifetime, and access a wide range of resources, all in the place where they live.”

Benefits of living and learning

Students who live in on-campus learning communities like the Houses have a richer and more supportive undergraduate experience than those who do not, according to the 2011 National Survey of Student Engagement. The survey polled more than 416,000 students from 673 U.S. colleges and universities and found that undergraduates who lived on campus were more likely to say their school provided needed academic support, encouraged contact among students from diverse backgrounds, and helped them cope with nonacademic responsibilities. On-campus students were also more likely to have had serious conversations with students whose views on religion, politics, or personal values differed from their own, and they spent about twice as much time in cocurricular activities such as sports, the arts, or community service.

“The research literature is pretty clear,” said Suzy Nelson, dean of

student life at Harvard College. “The connections that students make in these communities matter to the overall student experience.”

Research also shows a correlation between residential life and undergraduates’ academic experience and wellness. The 2007 National Study of Living and Learning Programs surveyed more than 22,000 students in 617 living and learning programs at 52 educational institutions. The study found that students who lived together in a residence with a clear academic mission and objectives and with dedicated staff and programming were more likely to form mentoring relationships with faculty members, to develop critical thinking skills, and to apply the knowledge they learned. Students in such communities were less likely to engage in binge drinking or experience serious health consequences associated with such alcohol abuse.

Nelson and her colleague Josh McIntosh, associate dean of student life, said that Harvard’s Houses are distinct among residential communities at U.S. colleges because they are led and staffed by scholars. Faculty members serve as masters. Grad student tutors serve as mentors and advise students on choosing concentrations, preparing for professional schools, and applying for fellowships. Tutors also provide spaces where students can explore new interests and experiences.

“Tutors help to create a community of entrepreneurialism and amateurism at the Houses,” McIntosh said. “So, if you’re not a varsity athlete, you can participate in intramural sports or fitness activities. If you live in Dunster or Lowell, you can be part of an opera. If you’re in Cabot House, you can be in a musical. They make it possible for students to take risks — whether in arts and culture, business and entrepreneurship, or athletics and recreation — with appropriate safety nets and cautions in place.”

Passions and pursuits



Deborah Gehrke, co-Master of Quincy House leads "Deb's Paint Bar" inside the master's residence in Quincy House. Credit: Kris Snibbe/Harvard Staff Photographer

Tung's House masters at Cabot, Rakesh and Stephanie Khurana, understand the value of being comfortable with risk and opportunity. Rakesh, the Marvin Bower Professor of Leadership Development at Harvard Business School (HBS), teaches some of the world's most ambitious, hard-driving students. Stephanie, who holds both an M.B.A. and an M.P.P. from Harvard, is an entrepreneur and a board member at the Tobin Project, an alliance of scholars and policymakers focused on pressing problems in American society. The programming at Cabot is driven by student passions and interests. The aim is to help undergraduates like Tung discover what inspires them and to help turn their interests into experiences.

“Our students and tutors — led by Pamela Jiménez Cárdenas ’13 — created a series called ‘Passions and Pursuits,’ ” Khurana said. “Students start by exploring their interests — maybe it’s public health, or social justice, social entrepreneurship, or international education — areas that are not necessarily on the beaten path. We get speakers to come in and give seminars. From exploring, we go to engaging. How might the

student explore the interest further? Do an internship? Take a class? The third piece is executing. How do they apply for the internship, job, or fellowship? Our resources are structured to support that path.”

Rakesh, who studies the history of business education, said Harvard’s model of residential learning is still innovative, even in the Internet age.

“The House system offers much more than an online workbook exercise or a simple information transfer,” he said. “We ask people to engage not only with knowledge and ideas, but with their peers and faculty. We bring students with different life experiences together to share their perspectives in a living environment that not only challenges them intellectually, but also asks them to put their ideas into social context. At the same time, we provide room for the individual to figure out who they are and how they want to contribute to their society and their community.”

An intellectual hothouse

Suzanna Bobadilla ’13 and Matt Chuchul ’13 spent Wintersession 2012 up to their eyeballs in old photos and documents.

The two history and literature concentrators, who describe themselves as “giddy about archival materials,” used the time between formal semesters to investigate the history of their campus home, Pforzheimer House, which was once inhabited exclusively by the female students of Radcliffe College. The project culminated in an exhibit of House artifacts, photographs, and personal testimonies. Titled “The Residential Revolution: The History of Gender and Pfoho Student Life,” the exhibit chronicled Harvard’s first real attempt at coeducation during the 1969-70 academic year.

Bobadilla said the project sharpened her research skills by bringing them

into the place where she lives.

“We took the tools and skills we had gained from history and literature, and applied them in a setting that was completely our own,” Bobadilla said. “Focusing on our House immersed us in the topic. Even the architecture of the bedroom that I sleep in at night and the walk we take every day down to the Yard has an important history.”

Bobadilla and Chuchul’s co-masters, Nicholas and Erika Christakis, said they strive to make Pfoho an intellectual hothouse. They talk with students and often dine with them. They encourage teachers to hold seminars and sections at Pfoho. They invite students to “wear their research on their sleeves,” and hold a seminar at the end of each year during which undergraduates present their theses. They also push tutors — who are usually Harvard grad students — to discuss their own work with undergraduates.

“We ask undergraduates and graduate students to talk about their research and their intellectual lives,” said Erika Christakis ’86, an early-childhood educator who holds master’s degrees in public health, communications, and education. “We want the tutors not to be seen as disciplinarians or people who sign study cards, but as people engaged in the life of the mind.”

The masters also support the popular “Pforum” speaker series, which features some of Harvard’s leading thinkers. Since 2010, the series has hosted Diane Paulus, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater; bioengineer Kit Parker; psychologist Dan Gilbert; social psychologist Mahzarin Banaji; stem cell scientist Doug Melton; and U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, a College and Law School alum who was recently chair of the Committee on Financial Services.

“We have a tremendous variety of speakers,” Christakis said. “The

turnout is tremendous as well. We often have 60 to 150 people attend an event. That's in a house of about 400 students.”

Nicholas Christakis, the author of “Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives,” and a member of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the faculty of Harvard Medical School, said that the connections students form in the living and learning communities profoundly affect their quality of life, both at the College and beyond.

“A principal source of human happiness — if not the main source — is a connection to other people,” Christakis said. “House life provides a structure to foster those social interactions. It helps build connections between students, between students and tutors (who are older role models), and between students and faculty, including the masters. All this is in the service of fostering students’ intellectual, social, and moral growth.”

Christakis is concerned about the tendency in the digital age to identify human social networks with the connections people make online. In a recent study of Harvard undergrads on Facebook, Christakis found that students had an average of 110 “friends.” To see how many of these relationships were close and how many tenuous, he had some students look at Facebook profiles to see how often classmates uploaded and tagged photographs of people they were connected to online. The findings reinforced the value of relationships based on the type of face-to-face contact President Lowell hoped the House system would increase.

“You might have 1,000 friends on Facebook, but only for a subset of them do you appear in a photograph that gets uploaded and tagged with your name,” Christakis told freshmen in a lecture that opened this academic year. “Based on this, we found that people typically had over

110 Facebook friends, but only six real friends” who uploaded and tagged their photos.

Living, learning among friends

Tuan Ho '09 was going to become a doctor. His father was one. His three older brothers were as well (although one did choose dental medicine.) Ho concentrated in chemistry and physics as an undergraduate and dutifully completed the courses required for medical school. He applied and was admitted to the University of Virginia and University of Michigan programs during his senior year. As graduation approached, however, Ho felt less and less enthusiastic about the prospect of eight years of medical education and residency. He loved to build things and to work with technology, but didn't feel he could pursue those interests. He felt lost.

“Even as a kid, I was always the engineering type,” Ho said. “I pursued the pre-med path and hit all the checkmarks. But I always got a sense that, while I could do the work, maybe I wasn't quite as passionate about it. It seemed like I was constantly yearning for something else. I didn't know what it was.”

As part of a senior year physics course, Ho and classmate Nick Krasney '09 figured out a way to stream TV programming over a broadband Internet connection. When classmates started asking for the service, Ho discovered his inner entrepreneur. He and Krasney started a company called Tivli that delivered the same programming as basic cable at a fraction of the cost. Ho decided that medical school would have to wait.

His parents were not pleased.

“They said, ‘You want to what?’” Ho recalled. “‘Defer medical school to work on a startup?’ They didn't take it well.”

Fortunately, Ho lived in Quincy House, where Masters Lee and Deb Gehrke had run into this situation before, as had the House's business and pre-med tutors. Along with friends and classmates, the Quincy advisers helped Ho through an at-times rocky transition.

“They told me that I wasn't alone, and that other students had gone through the same thing with their parents,” he said. “The pre-med tutor said that she had also deferred to do other things, and that I could always go back. The business tutor encouraged me. He saw the potential for what Nick and I could do. He said that, while there was risk, it was limited, because I had the deferral and could always go back to school.”

If Pfoho exemplifies the integration of intellectual and residential life, and Cabot the transformation of ideas into experiences, Quincy demonstrates the way that the House system supports students' development as individuals. The Gehrkes work to make Quincy a place where residents can be themselves, be different, and be among friends.

“We make a tremendous effort to make sure that the House isn't just a dorm,” said Lee Gehrke. “We want this to be a place that students can come back to and feel they're home, surrounded by people who are supportive of them. This is a diverse community. We want everyone who lives here to feel like this is a place where they can be everything that they can be.”

The shape of things to come

In many ways, Quincy's support for personal and social development represents the essence of Lowell's vision of a residential system that develops student character. So it's perhaps fitting that the House is at the forefront of an effort to lead that vision into the future. On May 2, Harvard broke ground on the Old Quincy Test Project, which will renew the residence and create a 21st-century student experience. When the

project wraps up in the summer of 2013, undergraduates will return to a re-envisioned House that is more comfortable, more modern, and more capable of hosting academic and social activities.

“The spaces will be fresh and new,” Deb Gehrke said. “We’ll have new common rooms, new practice space for musicians, studio space for artists, and a terrace that can accommodate about 80 students for dinner parties and events. There’s been a lot of emphasis on social spaces, and that’s intentional. Our students are developing serious leadership skills and the ability to interact with people in a productive way. Whether it’s a political group, or the Asian-Christian fellowship, or a startup like Tivli, the renewed House will have space for students to come together and make great things happen.”

The lessons learned from the renewal of Old Quincy will inform a second test project at Leverett House’s McKinlock Hall, tentatively slated for June 2013. When resources allow, the College hopes to apply the knowledge from both projects to a system-wide, once-in-a-century renewal that will redefine residential learning at Harvard.

“Even in an age where technology allows students to talk and work with people all over the world, the residential community is still a critical component of the learning experience,” said Hammonds. “The values and strengths of House life will continue to serve the College far into the future.”

Meanwhile, these are exciting times for entrepreneur Ho. Tivli now operates out of the new Harvard Innovation Lab and has seen enough success that Ho decided to defer medical school for a second and third year. Now a nonresident tutor in entrepreneurship at Quincy, Ho said he’s closer to his House and the Harvard community than ever.

“Even when I graduated and worked on a startup in an old, dark

apartment in Inman Square, I was still part of the House community,” he said. “It really helped me through the ups and downs of starting a company in Cambridge. Tivli is in the i-lab because of the connections I made at entrepreneurship events Nick and I participated in as nonresident tutors. I probably wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing now without the support that I got at Quincy.”

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