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Living on Campus: An Architectural History of the American Dormitory

Carla Yanni

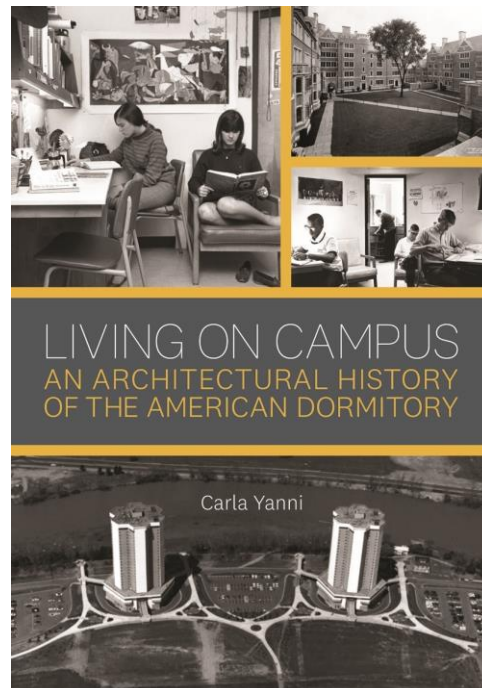
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Why is living on campus so prevalent in the United States, and how do the designs of residence halls reflect American educational and societal ideals? Carla Yanni addresses these questions in *Living on Campus*, a history of purpose-built structures intended to house students on American campuses. Dormitory architecture, she argues, “provides a lens through which to examine the socially constructed nature of the student” (1). Examining the designs of residence halls reveals how Americans planned these spaces to maintain values about “segregation of races, social classes, and genders” held by benefactors, administrators, architects, students, and society at large (10). Additionally, she examines how attitudes about domesticity, community, and student life are revealed in the plans of residence halls.

Until Yanni’s book, no one has examined the three-century history of the American residence hall, despite its centrality to collegiate experience. Paul Venable Turner, the principal architectural historian of the American campus and author of *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (1984), called the study of American collegiate architecture a “surprisingly neglected part of the American environment.”¹ More than three decades after Turner wrote his defining book, few authors have published comprehensive architectural surveys or even specialized texts on the topic.² Yanni’s *Living on Campus* is the first of its kind, a profound sociospatial history of American dormitory architecture.

Yanni focuses predominantly on two major types of dorm plans—the staircase (or entryway) plan and the double-loaded corridor plan. She relates these plans to the building mass—rectangular, U-shaped, quadrangular, and irregular—and the architectural relationship to other collegiate buildings on campuses. Evidence from architectural plans and photographs, material culture, correspondence, institutional archives, promotional materials, and



firsthand accounts demonstrate how the architecture of residence halls provides a lens for analyzing such issues as “inclusion, exclusion, class, and gender” among college students (7). Similar to her previous book, *The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States* (2007), Yanni’s *Living on Campus* studies decisions by architects and administrators in building communal living arrangements as spaces to surveil and influence behavior.³ Like an asylum, the dormitory demonstrates similar social and environmental determinants influencing its architecture, including the academic values of socialization among students (1–2, 18–19, 219).

Living on Campus is chronologically ordered with five chapters and an epilogue in which the author, Yanni, tracks three centuries of dormitory themes, trends, and plans. Each chapter explores select case studies that “fit within a confined chronological era” and reflect “moments of controversy” and “important changes in management of student life,” such as the professionalization of housing authorities (5, 7). Her case studies survey well-known and vernacular examples at land-grant schools, the Ivy League, private and public universities, and small colleges. Among the numerous case studies, Yanni features Rutgers University in multiple chapters. This choice is unsurprising, since she has taught at Rutgers for more than a decade and first began exploring questions about living on campus while there.⁴ While her case studies are numerous, reading her book left me wanting additional case studies to confirm her conclusions or perhaps offer additional arguments, perhaps regarding schools that separated men’s and women’s campuses, such as Duke University, or institutions with designated spaces for undergraduates, graduates, and married couples. These are, however, minor quibbles. In her introduction, Yanni acknowledges that scholars might select different case studies, but she insists that “the conclusions would not diverge strongly from hers,” and I agree (5–6).

In chapter one, “College Housing for Men: Fellowship and Exclusivity,” Yanni analyzes men’s housing at American colleges from the mid-seventeenth century to 1900. She focuses on four major building types—sleeping rooms in all-in-one academic buildings, standalone dormitories, fraternity houses, and boardinghouses—that represented fellowship and exclusivity, as well as “crisscrossed boundaries between home and school, domestic and public” (33). Given the time frame of 250 years, the list of examples is lengthier in this chapter than in later chapters. She begins with the earliest examples of student residence, such as at Harvard’s Indian College (1650s) for Native American students, which would have been the first standalone dormitory if it had not been for the building’s printing press (35). In this early example of student housing, Native American students were segregated from white colonial males. Yanni proves, then that “from the very beginning of college in North America, student housing existed to establish hierarchies” (36). The first freestanding dormitory in the colonies was Harvard’s Stoughton Hall (1698), which had a staircase plan and no internal corridor, and forty students had bedrooms with small accompanying studies. She also examines well-known buildings, such as William & Mary’s so-called Wren Building (1705), Robert Smith’s design for Princeton’s Nassau Hall (1754–56), and Benjamin Henry Latrobe’s scheme for Dickinson College’s Old West (1803).⁵ The U-shaped Wren Building student quarters were laid out on double-loaded corridors, while Nassau Hall and Old West had rooms for two students (doubles) with alcove-like spaces for study carrels, similar to those found at the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge (39–49). Nassau Hall influenced a stream of “Old Mains,” all-in-one academic halls with student housing (46). To monitor students, faculty and administrators acted in loco parentis and lived

among the students, an arrangement adopted again by deans and housing authorities in the late nineteenth century (76).

Chapter one also addresses the function and impact of off-campus student quarters at boardinghouses and fraternity houses. Boardinghouses were preferred by colleges that lacked financial means to build residence halls, such as early Queens College (now Rutgers University). Another off-campus housing option was the fraternity house. While boardinghouses and dormitories were affordable and generally available to all students, fraternities were exclusive, accepting usually the “wealthiest insiders” (34). Yanni’s assessment of fraternities at The Ohio State University, University of Michigan, and Cornell University portrays them as less democratic options for students. As she states, fraternities at these schools evaded much of administrator surveillance and discipline by occupying large houses off campus where secret and exclusive activities took place. For example, Yanni describes the Cornell chapter house of Alpha Delta Phi (1900–1903), including its sixteen-sided, windowless Goat House, as a masculine advertisement for the fraternity’s “elitism, secrecy, mystery, and exclusion” (69). The scheme showing the chapter house and Goat House connected by a long corridor of rooms reveals, Yanni observes, the fraternity’s wish to express visually its masculine virility in a plan resembling “an architecturally modified phallus” (70).⁶

In chapter two, “The Coed’s Predicament,” Yanni examines women’s dormitories at coeducational colleges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She prefaces chapter two with a brief discussion of Helen L. Horowitz’s history of the Seven Sisters women’s colleges and asserts that “most of the issues [Horowitz] discusses were amplified at coeducational schools” (80–81). She also acknowledges Margaret A. Lowe’s findings on college women and body image, which were shaped heavily “before a watchful and often critical male audience” (81).⁷ Horowitz studied the built environment of the Seven Sisters, of which Yanni briefly discusses Smith College, but Lowe and others have not regarded the sociospatial context of early dormitories inhabited by coeds. The term “coed,” a derogatory reference for female students distinguishing them from male students, “suggests second-class status, and indeed women *were* second-class citizens in the educational landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (79, 80–81). As the number of women attending college rose, especially at land-grant schools that stipulated the admission of both sexes, so too did the need for residence halls to house them. Most women’s dorms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were heavily surveilled by “lady principals” and “deans of women”; had single monitored entrances to either congregate or cottage dormitories; and featured public, chaperoned spaces in which women could host men and others in homelike and genteel environments (82, 85–88). Elaborate reception rooms can be found in the Gold and Red Rooms at the University of Michigan Martha Cook Building (1915), which became the social center of the university (101–8). Yanni also examines women’s dormitories at Oberlin College, Cornell University, University of Chicago, and University of Michigan. At these and other coeducational institutions, the most important administrative development affecting dormitory life during this time was the professionalization of deans of women, who managed women’s academic, social, physical, and extracurricular activities. Deans of women acknowledged women’s housing as the center of social activity on campuses and listed dormitories as the first agenda item at the first Conference of Deans of Women of the Middle West in 1903 (92).

Yanni focuses chapter three, “Quadrangles in the Early Twentieth Century,” on Oxbridge-inspired residence halls in the early twentieth century. While many nineteenth-century

research universities in the United States prioritized laboratories and classroom buildings over dormitories, looking to the German model, the Oxbridge residential system of dormitories became popular at the turn of the century through the 1930s. Yanni asserts that the reason college administrators adopted the residential system was a general belief that living in a communal space promoted good character and democratic values, as well as “transformed inchoate children into responsible moral adults . . . *outside the classroom*” (117–18). Academic deans promoted “architecture as an agent of reform” to reinforce good moral character and socialization among students (119). Yanni analyzes dormitories arranged around quadrangles, including those at the University of Wisconsin, Howard University, and Yale University. At each of these institutions, deans were interested in implementing a homelike environment of student family units, contributing to what administrators characterized as the development of the “whole student” (118).

Different from Wisconsin and Howard, Yale’s residential colleges were closest to their British counterparts. Through the collaboration of Yale President James Angell and later major benefactor Edward Harkness, the plan was meant to mend the “social fabric of Yale” (145). Each college housed students from a variety of disciplines and had its own dining hall, organizations, newspaper, and sports teams. In the ten colleges constructed before 1950, the architects (James Gamble Rogers and John Russell Pope) varied the styles of each college, usually alternating between Colonial Revival and Collegiate Gothic. Each college’s architectural style(s) reflected a distinct community as microcosm within the university as macrocosm, allowing what Turner described as “a natural setting for a college community that valued intimacy and fellowship” (142–45).⁸ Yanni’s analysis of the Yale residential system would benefit from a deeper study of President James Angell’s and John V. Farwell’s (chairman of the Committee on the Architectural Plan) reasons for implementing the 1925 “Quadrangle Plan,” namely mounting concerns related to town and gown interactions in New Haven. Still, Yanni succeeds in expounding the ways residential systems at Yale and elsewhere in the early twentieth century solved the problem of maintaining small family-like social groups within a large university both inside and outside the classroom.

In chapter four, “Dorms on the Rise: Skyscraper Residence Halls,” Yanni addresses the impact of post-World War II culture and the G.I. Bill (Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, 1944) on campus housing. The Cold War and McCarthyism convinced many Americans, Yanni argues, “to place their faith in education as a means of defeating communism, and middle-class families expected to send their children to college” (153). As a result, enrollment at universities nearly doubled; diversity increased (“if only among whites”); and students and administrators alike embraced on-campus living (153).

Building dormitories was paramount because of housing shortages. Historical dormitories were no longer in fashion, and administrators focused their efforts on building modern (International Style) skyscraper dormitories. Architecture firms such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill advocated the economic advantages of building high-rise dormitories; after five floors and elevators have been added, “one might as well add a few more floors” (154). Yanni’s analyses of three significant skyscraper dormitory programs at Rutgers, New York University (NYU), and Ohio State elucidate the benefits and shortcomings of these high-rise residential halls. Administrators at Rutgers, for example, saw its three high-rise River Dorms (1955–56) as a way to elevate its once-modest liberal arts college to the status of a progressive, modern state university. Yet, others at Rutgers were concerned that the modern River Dorms lacked homelike qualities, “unless the students had grown up in the so-called projects” (165).

Another case study, the NYU coed Silver Residence Hall (1956–61) in the Bronx, succeeded in capturing Marcel Breuer’s Bauhaus spirit. However, its Soviet Constructivist style and surveilled interactions between male and female students confused the intended democratic values espoused by the university and its major donor Julius Silver (175–76). Although skyscraper dorms are common building types on campuses today and have many economic advantages, Yanni concludes that housing authorities (and many students) see few educational values in high-rises and describe them as isolating and unwelcoming (183). The swift rejection of high-rises in decades to follow corroborates her findings. Yanni’s study would be enriched by also examining institutions that continued to adopt low-rise dormitories and historicizing styles; however, her sociospatial study of high-rise residential halls illustrates just how substantially and rapidly postwar America shifted trends in plans, styles, and management of dormitory architecture. Relating these trends to postwar changes in higher education, she proves that most institutions shifted their educational focus from tradition to progress.

Yanni’s last chapter, “Rejecting the High Rise: Quadrangles (Redux) and Hill Towns,” surveys responses to the skyscraper dormitory, which paralleled immense changes in student culture in the 1960s. Students on campus rebelled against *in loco parentis* and pushed for greater autonomy in on-campus living experiences. To counteract the “forceful youth culture” of the 1960s and 1970s, housing authorities “persisted in maintaining that the residence hall was essential for building student character” (185). Many housing authorities blamed student rebellion on the long, windowless corridors and sparse rooms of International Style skyscraper dormitories, which alienated and “undermined the individuality of students” (186). As a result, for the first time, housing authorities listened to their students with genuine concern to counter dorm dwellers’ feelings of anonymity and subjugation (185). Yanni addresses such responses to modern architecture and urban planning in her study of residential systems at three universities—Yale’s Morse and Stiles Colleges (1958–62), the University of California-Santa Cruz’s Cowell and Kresge Colleges (1963–73), and Rutgers’s Livingston College (1965–70).

Residential colleges at these universities move away from the Oxbridge quadrangle plan and instead resemble nonrectilinear plans of premodern villages, especially the “hill town model.” This nod to the vernacular and reaction to Miesian planning paralleled global efforts by CIAM’s (Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne, or International Congresses of Modern Architecture) Team X, who looked to the hill town as a solution to the “anonymous, car-oriented, disingenuous universality of modernism with a kind of architecture that would meet the needs of specific communities” (187). Building smaller, village-like communities within larger universities gave students the social atmosphere of a small community without getting lost in a sea of people and buildings at the American “multiversity.”⁹

For example, Eero Saarinen’s plans for Morse and Stiles Colleges expressed hill town concepts in cascading terraces, crooked streets, and irregular facades. The buildings turned inward around interior courts, much like Yale’s earlier residential colleges, but Saarinen’s asymmetrical elevations and irregular plazas resembled medieval Italian towns built over the course of centuries, instead of just four years. Similar to Yale’s other residential colleges, Saarinen’s plans for Morse and Stiles “avoid[ed] the sense of standardization.”¹⁰ Yanni’s other case studies in this chapter correspond to Saarinen’s village-like residential colleges, inviting casual interactions and flexible uses of space (206). More than ever before, housing authorities gave students agency in their on-campus living and educational experiences, but

the concepts remained the same—“architecture shapes morality of students and that character development is central to the university’s mission” (218). Similar to previous chapters, Yanni does especially well explaining mainstream trends in dormitory architecture during the 1960s and 1970s. Incorporating more diverse examples of dormitory architecture from more regions (such as the South) and smaller institutions with modest budgets might reinforce her conclusions, or perhaps offer alternative responses to the 1960s counterculture. However, Yanni undoubtedly succeeds in identifying early responses to International Style dormitories.

Yanni’s epilogue briefly addresses the conditions of present-day dormitories, which reflect similar social functions of past residence halls built over the course of three centuries. She sees the same class hierarchies, racial tensions, and gender distinctions in contemporary dormitories, but students now “bear little resemblance to their predecessors” (219). While today’s students of different classes choose their college or university based on like-minded peers, wealth, and convenience, they also challenge hierarchies and inequalities still apparent in on-campus living conditions. For example, she revisits the chapter three study of Yale’s Calhoun College and its controversial connection to prominent Yale alumnus, South Carolina statesman, and avid slavery advocate John C. Calhoun. After Yale’s president decided against a name change in 2015, a committee reversed the decision and renamed the college after computer scientist Grace Murray Hopper. After protest and property destruction of iconographic references to Calhoun’s slavery connections, Yale removed remaining controversial visuals celebrating a racist past and plans to recontextualize the work in a museum environment (226–27). Yanni cites other recent instances as well when students have protested against exclusivity and advocated diversity.

With the rise in online education and high cost of living on campus, Yanni questions the role dormitories will “play in the future of higher education” (220). She concludes that dormitories remain relevant because parents and administrators promote on-campus housing as vital to the “whole experience” of college students (220). On-campus housing persists as a “transitional space” between high school and adulthood that solidifies important social and business connections (25, 236). But living on campus is expensive, and student debt is rising (\$1.3 trillion in 2017), especially as colleges and universities compete with one another in building elaborate dormitories with attractive amenities (236). Even as the number of students living off campus increases and the number of dormitories decreases, Yanni predicts that the dormitory and other on-campus housing (for example, fraternities and sororities) will endure on American campuses as spaces for both education and social networking. The architecture of on-campus housing, therefore, “is an ever-changing manifestation of the social meaning of higher education” (236).

Readers will appreciate Yanni’s *Living on Campus* for its rich historical and architectural analysis of three hundred years of student life at American colleges and universities. She adeptly interweaves firsthand narratives of students, administrators, deans, and architects. The final product is an admirable compendium of well-researched stories that skillfully elucidate complex themes in dormitory architecture as related to campus planning, higher education, and society at large. She illustrates each case study with architectural plans and historical photographs showing dormitory interiors, student life in residential halls and fraternities, coed experiences, and more. While her study could benefit from further elaboration on town-gown relations, stylistic influences, and diverse case studies (representing class, race, and gender), her sound conclusions about mainstream trends of dormitory architecture provide insight into previously unanswered questions. Yanni’s clear

writing and engaging visuals make her text accessible to a variety of audiences, from undergraduates to well-versed scholars. Readers whose interests include American architecture, campus planning, higher education, and student experiences during college will enjoy Yanni's comprehensive study as both an introductory and deep historical study of dormitory architecture.

Notes

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- ¹ Paul Venable Turner, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 6.
 - ² Besides Turner, *Campus*, these include: Margaret M. Grubiak, *White Elephants on Campus: The Decline of the University Chapel in America, 1920–1960* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014); Dale Allen Gyure, "The Heart of the University: A History of the Library as an Architectural Symbol of American Higher Education," *Winterthur Portfolio* 42, nos. 2/3 (2008): 107–32; and Clare Robinson, "Architecture in Support of Citizenry: Vernon DeMars and the Berkeley Student Union," *Journal of Architectural Education* 70, no. 2 (2016): 236–46. Although not an architectural historian, Helen Horowitz's social histories of women's colleges examines the college as a "history of place" (7). Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's College from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s*, 2nd ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).
 - ³ Carla Yanni, *The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
 - ⁴ Alissa Pabon, "Rutgers Professor Carla Yanni Discusses the History of Women in Co-Ed Dormitories," *The Statesman*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.sbstatesman.com/2019/10/16/rutgers-professor-carla-yanni-discusses-the-history-of-women-in-co-ed-dormitories>.
 - ⁵ The Wren Building is named after, though not provably designed by, Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723). The first mention of Wren's attribution occurred in 1724 by Hugh Jones in *The Present State of Virginia*. For discussion on Wren's design attribution, see James D. Kornwolf, "So Good a Design," *The Colonial Campus of the College of William and Mary: Its History, Background, and Legacy* (Williamsburg, VA: The College of William and Mary, 1989).
 - ⁶ For her discussion on white American fraternities, Yanni relies heavily on Nicholas Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
 - ⁷ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 65; and Margaret A. Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875–1930* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 73.
 - ⁸ Turner, *Campus*, 216.
 - ⁹ Yanni borrows Kerr's term "multiversity" to characterize the exponential growth of American universities in the twentieth century. See Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 5–7, 31–33.
 - ¹⁰ Eero Saarinen, "Saarinen Explains: An Architecture for Individuals," *Yale Daily News*, February 17, 1959.