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Seeing Yourself in Your Room: The Relationship Between Undergraduate Flourishing and Identification with Student Housing



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A FEELING OF CONNECTION WITH A PHYSICAL SETTING

can have important psychological consequences for occupants. Although research has begun to explore how the design of student housing can improve the experiences of undergraduates, the students themselves have the capacity to adapt their environments in ways that better reflect their own values, interests, and personalities. This empirical study tests the extent to which a sense of place identity related to one's housing predicts positive mental health. Controlling for demographic and stable personality traits, this analysis found that place identity was positively associated with psychological well-being (but not social or emotional well-being). Moreover, a mediation analysis revealed that this association can be explained by the additive effects of more frequent positive affect, a greater sense of autonomy, and stronger self-regulatory ability. These findings lend support to the idea that adaptable housing, wherein students customize and personalize their living spaces, is associated with multiple psychological benefits.

Note: Data were collected while the author was affiliated with Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

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Over the last decade, there has been growing public concern about the mental health crisis at American colleges and universities (e.g., Moore, 2018; "There Is a Mental-Health Crisis on Campus," 2019). This concern is justified, as rates of undergraduate mental health problems have been increasing over the last several decades (American Psychological Association, 2013; Bland et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2012). Students report many sources of stress, including academic difficulties, finances, sleep deprivation, and family problems (Beiter et al., 2015), which can lead to more serious mental health disorders (Beiter et al., 2015; Watkins et al., 2012) and a number of negative academic outcomes, such as attrition and poor class performance (Ahrberg et al., 2012; Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Struthers et al., 2000). In light of these statistics, many colleges and

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universities have devoted substantial resources towards providing students with therapy and counseling services.

However, many researchers and practitioners argue that responses to the mental health crisis should not be focused simply on the treatment of disorders. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argue, psychology “concentrates on repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning. This almost exclusive attention to pathology neglects the fulfilled individual and the thriving community” (p. 5). In other words, a lack of mental illness does not imply the presence of mental health, so treatment alone will never be successful in creating a happy and fulfilled population. Instead, a *eudaimonic* approach to health emphasizes the need to actively promote, facilitate, and support human flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Flourishing is characterized by positive well-being across three broad life dimensions (Keyes, 2002, 2007): emotional (positive affect and life satisfaction), social (feelings of belonging and acceptance of others), and psychological (self-acceptance, purpose, and a sense of personal growth). Based on this model of mental health, institutions should prioritize supporting students’ positive attitudes, habits, and experiences. Examples of eudaimonic programs implemented by colleges and universities include relaxation training techniques, mindfulness-based stress reduction, and psychoeducation programs (Yusufov et al., 2019).

In addition to these intervention strategies, some scholars have argued that the physical design of the campus can also play an important role in student well-being (Godshall, 2000; Strange & Banning, 2001). For example, the presence of physical spaces on campus

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representative of a student’s ethnic (Kirby et al., 2020) or religious (Bilewicz & Klebaniuk, 2013) identity impacts feelings of belongingness and engagement. Moreover, many studies have begun to demonstrate the varied psychological effects associated with differences in the physical design of student housing (e.g., Bronkema & Bowman, 2017; Kaya & Weber, 2003; Mogenet & Rioux, 2014; Samura, 2016; Verhetsel et al., 2017). Illustrative of this, students in housing that affords more frequent social interactions (e.g., corridor-style versus apartments) tend to have a greater sense of community (Devlin et al., 2008) and more positive academic outcomes (Brown et al., 2019). Thus, properties of students’ physical environment can have a critical impact on their psychological experience of college.

Nevertheless, the importance of a student’s residence is based on more than just its architecture and amenities. Rather, it is the environment on campus that is distinctly the student’s own (Clemons et al., 2005; Dazkir, 2018). Environmental psychologists have long been interested in the consequences of this type of person-environment relationship. First, the concept of *place attachment* describes an individual’s emotional bond to a physical setting (Altman & Low, 1992; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Places to which one is highly attached

function as safe havens during times of distress and secure bases from which to recover. Second, *place identity* is characterized by the extent to which a setting reflects, reinforces, and communicates the identity of its resident (Belk, 1992; Gosling et al., 2008; Proshansky et al., 1983). By marking their environments with decorations, alterations, and behavioral residue (Altman, 1975; Gosling et al., 2002; Hansen & Altman, 1976), an occupant can create an environment with strong ties to his or her own self-concept. Naturally, the extent to which an undergraduate actually feels that their living space reflects their identity will vary substantially (Meagher, 2016).

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In the current study, I investigate whether these feelings of connection with one's housing are in fact associated with flourishing among students, above and beyond anticipated demographic and personality variables. Moreover, I evaluate several potential explanations (i.e., mediators) for this theorized relationship. First, being able to adapt a space to reflect one's identity may be particularly valuable for emotion regulation. Gosling and colleagues (2008) have argued that marking a space can in large part be conceptualized as creat-

ing "feeling regulators." Surrounding oneself with photographs of loved ones, objects from important life events, or decorations reflecting one's interests serves the function of promoting positive and reducing negative emotions. In this way, one can create a setting with an ambience most compatible with promoting positive affective experiences (Graham et al., 2015). In fact, research on favorite places highlights the strong emotional components of this person-environment relationship (Korpela, 1989, 1992; Manzo, 2003, 2005), emphasizing that important places are identified as such because of their ability to elicit desired emotions.

Alternatively, place identity may promote flourishing by facilitating more effective behavioral self-regulation (Meagher, 2020). In altering their home environments, occupants create settings with particular behavioral opportunities (i.e., affordances; Gibson, 1979). Being in a space that facilitates desired behaviors will be critical for undergraduates, who use their rooms for a variety of purposes (Amole, 2005). A room high in place identity will invite its occupant to engage in more personally meaningful behaviors (Withagen et al., 2012), consistent with previous research demonstrating that place identity is positively associated with flow experiences (Bonaiuto et al., 2016). Additionally, the setting can also be arranged by its occupant in ways that inhibit maladaptive behaviors, thereby promoting prospective self-control (Fujita, 2011; Trope & Fishbach, 2005). In this way, having a space that aids the student's capacity to regulate their own behavior towards their ideal self may facilitate flourishing.

Finally, a third potential pathway from place identity to student well-being may come

through the sense of autonomy elicited by having an environment that one controls. As Altman (1975) notes, marking one’s environment entails not just self-expression, but also control-oriented motivations. That is, it reflects the power of the individual over what takes place in this space. Ulrich’s (1991) theory of supportive design describes a perceived sense of control as a crucial environmental dimension for alleviating stress. Subsequent research has demonstrated that control does predict less anxiety in hospital contexts (Andrade & Devlin, 2015; Andrade et al., 2017) and greater job satisfaction at work (Lee & Brand, 2005, 2010). Thus, students who have the freedom to create a room that reflects their desires may benefit from the sense of autonomy such a setting provides.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of undergraduate students (*N*=254) enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a liberal arts college in the Midwest during the 2019–20 academic school year. See Table 1 for additional sample information. Inclusion in this analysis was limited to students who resided in on-campus housing. At this college, housing consists primarily of corridor-style residence halls with a communal bathroom for each wing, with the exception of one large building of suites reserved for upper-division students.

Measures

The measures reported here were part of a large online questionnaire offered to all introductory psychology students that year. First, participants were asked to think about their room on campus (i.e., the room that has their bed in it). They completed 4-item measures of place

identity and place attachment on 7-point Likert scales, adapted from Jorgensen and Stedman (2001). Place identity items were “Everything about my room is a reflection of me,” “My room says very little about who I am,” “I feel that I can really be myself in my room,” and “My room reflects the type of person I am” ($\alpha = .78$). Place attachment items were “I feel relaxed when I am in my room,” “I feel happiest when I am in my room,” “My room is my favorite place to be on campus,” and “I really miss my room when I’m away from it for too long” ($\alpha = .81$).

Table 1	
Characteristics of the Sample	
Sample size	254
Mean age	18.51 (0.80)
Gender	
Male	32%
Female	68%
Race and ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	85%
Hispanic	6%
Asian	4%
Black/African American	3%
Other	2%
Class	
First-year	76%
Sophomore	17%
Junior	6%
Senior	1%
Roommates	
Single	8%
1 roommate	69%
2 roommates	21%
3 or more roommates	2%
Note: Standard deviation shown in parentheses.	

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The outcome variables for this analysis were drawn from the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2002, 2007), which assesses positive mental health across three different dimensions: emotional, social, and psychological. Participants indicated how frequently they had experienced a series of feelings over the previous month, on a 0-5 scale ranging from *never* to *every day*. The emotional flourishing measure consisted of three items, including “interested in life” and “satisfied in life” ($\alpha = .90$); the social flourishing measure consisted of five items, including “you had something important to contribute to society” and “you belonged to a community” ($\alpha = .80$); and the psychological flourishing measure consisted of seven items, including “you liked most parts of your personality” and “you had experiences that challenged you to grow and become a better person” ($\alpha = .86$). Three scales were used to measure participants on the hypothesized mediating variables: (a) the short version of the Self-Regulation Questionnaire (Carey et al., 2004), a 31-item measure of one’s ability to regulate behavior to achieve desired outcomes ($\alpha = .90$); (b) the 5-item authorship/self-congruence subscale of the Index of Autonomous Functioning (Weinstein et al., 2012), which measures the belief that one’s behaviors are authentic and reflective of their own desires ($\alpha = .89$); and (c) the

20-item Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988), assessing the participants’ frequency of experiencing both positive ($\alpha = .93$) and negative ($\alpha = .84$) emotional states. Finally, participants completed the Big Five Inventory (John et al., 1991), which provides a measure of extraversion ($\alpha = .89$), agreeableness ($\alpha = .79$), conscientiousness ($\alpha = .76$), neuroticism ($\alpha = .82$), and openness ($\alpha = .72$). These traits were included in this study to function as covariates in the analysis, in order to control for the effects of stable personality factors.

... the presence of physical spaces on campus representative of a student’s ethnic or religious identity impacts feelings of belongingness and engagement.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for measured constructs are shown in Table 2. Place identity related to one’s residence was positively correlated with self-reported autonomy, self-regulatory ability, and positive affect. Attachment to the room, on the other hand, was only associated with higher levels of autonomy. The only form of well-being with a statistically significant relationship with place identity was psychological. Place attachment was not associated with any of the forms of well-being.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations for Measured Constructs									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Place identity									
2. Place attachment	.56**								
3. Positive affect	.14*	-.01							
4. Negative affect	-.02	-.03	.15*						
5. Autonomy	.21**	.17**	.31**	-.11					
6. Self-regulation	.14*	-.02	.35**	-.20**	.47**				
7. Emotional well-being	.11	-.03	.39**	-.25**	.30**	.36**			
8. Social well-being	.09	-.07	.43**	-.09	.23**	.29**	.66**		
9. Psychological well-being	.21**	.00	.47**	-.26**	.43**	.53**	.72**	.69**	
Mean	4.89	4.41	2.77	1.98	3.93	3.67	3.74	2.99	3.64
Standard deviation	1.18	1.26	0.96	0.71	0.66	0.49	0.80	0.96	0.82
Scale range	1-7	1-7	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

To explore the association between place identity and psychological well-being, a series of hierarchical linear regressions were conducted. The coefficients for these analyses are shown in Table 3. In Model 1, psychological well-being was first predicted by three demographic control variables: gender, current year in college, and identification as a racial minority. None of these factors were statistically significant predictors, explaining a very small percentage of variance, $R^2 = .01$. The inclusion of the Big Five personality factors in Model 2 produced a substantial change in the explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .31$, $F(5, 245) = 22.55$, $p < .001$. Four of the five personality traits were associated with well-being: extraversion, $b = .23$, $\beta = .24$, $t(245) = 4.28$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.12, .33]; conscientiousness, $b = .38$, $\beta = .26$, $t(245) = 4.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.22, .55]; neuroticism, $b = -.30$, $\beta = -.28$, $t(245) = 4.50$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.44,

-.17]; and openness, $b = .24$, $\beta = .16$, $t(245) = 2.95$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [.08, .41]. In Model 3, place identity was added, which also improved fit, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 244) = 11.15$, $p = .001$. Thus, place identity was a unique predictor of psychological well-being, above and beyond the individual's personality traits.

To further evaluate this relationship, a parallel multivariable mediation model was conducted using the SPSS macro PROCESS v3.1 (Hayes, 2013). This model sought to evaluate the extent to which positive affect, negative affect, autonomy, and self-regulation would explain the relationship between place identity and psychological well-being. This analysis made use of 5,000 bootstrapping samples, with significance testing conducted with 95% confidence intervals correcting for biases in the sampling distribution. The completely standardized indirect effects, which are used

Table 3**Parameter Estimates Predicting Psychological Well-Being**

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Intercept	3.67	.13		1.19	.63		.89	.63	
Gender	-.04	.06	-.05	-.03	.05	-.03	.01	.05	.01
Year in college	-.05	.08	-.04	-.07	.07	-.05	-.05	.07	-.04
Racial minority	-.03	.07	-.03	.01	.06	.01	.03	.06	.02
Extraversion	-	-	-	.23**	.05	.24	.22**	.05	.22
Agreeableness	-	-	-	.13	.08	.09	.12	.08	.08
Conscientiousness	-	-	-	.38**	.08	.26	.36**	.08	.25
Neuroticism	-	-	-	-.30**	.07	-.28	-.32**	.07	-.30
Openness	-	-	-	.24**	.08	.16	.21*	.08	.14
Place identity	-	-	-	-	-	-	.13**	.04	.18

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < 0.1$

as measures of effect size, indicate the size of the indirect effects relative to the variation in psychological well-being and place identity that is not accounted for by gender, race, college year, and the Big Five traits.

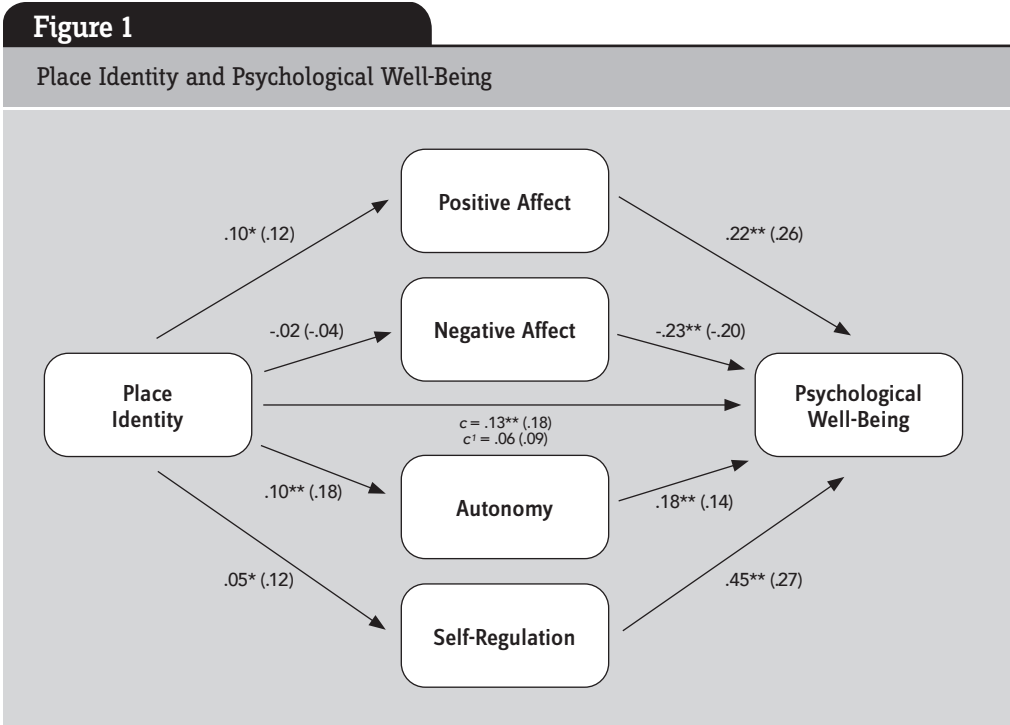
Figure 1 shows the coefficient values for this model. Together, these variables accounted for more than half of the variance in psychological well-being, $R^2 = .51$. The total effect of place identity on psychological well-being (c) was statistically significant, $b = .13$, $\beta = .18$, $t(244) = 3.31$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [.05, .20]. However, when accounting for the mediators included in the model, the direct effect (c') of place identity ceased to be a statistically significant factor, $b = .06$, $\beta = .09$, $t(240) = 1.75$, $p = .081$, 95% CI [-.01, .13]. Even so, statistically significant indirect effects were observed for three of the four potential mediators. The strongest indirect effect of place identity on psychologi-

cal well-being was found via self-regulation, $b = .02$, $\beta = .03$, 95% CI [.00, .05], followed by positive affect, $b = .02$, $\beta = .03$, 95% CI [.00, .05], and autonomy, $b = .02$, $\beta = .03$, 95% CI [.00, .04].¹

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to evaluate whether undergraduate flourishing would be associated with the students' feelings that their campus housing reflects their identity. Drawing on Keyes' (2002, 2007) conceptualization of flourishing, three outcomes were assessed: emotional well-being (satisfaction with life), social well-being (functioning as part of a wider society), and psychological well-being (one's

¹ Excluding the covariates from this analysis does not change the overall pattern of results, although it does slightly increase the magnitude of the indirect effects: positive affect, $b = .03$, $\beta = .05$, 95% CI [.00, .07]; self-regulation, $b = .03$, $\beta = .04$, 95% CI [.00, .06]; and autonomy, $b = .02$, $\beta = .03$, 95% CI [.00, .05].



Note. This figure shows regression coefficients for the relationship between place identity and psychological well-being, as mediated by positive and negative affect, autonomy, and self-regulation, controlling for gender, racial identity, college year, and Big Five traits. Standardized coefficients are shown in parentheses.

intrapersonal functioning, including self-acceptance, personal growth, and purpose in life). This analysis revealed that place identity was positively associated with the latter form of well-being specifically, even when controlling for stable demographic and personality characteristics. Moreover, the mediation model tested in this analysis found that the effect of place identity on psychological well-being was explained by three distinct processes: the residents' self-regulatory ability, sense of autonomy, and the frequency of positive affective states. Thus, there appear to be several positive benefits associated with this sense of connection to one's housing, and each provides a potential pathway towards greater psychological well-being.

These findings are notable, as the existing research investigating the effects of residence hall architecture on student outcomes has tended to focus largely on how design can elicit a greater sense of belonging and community (Bronkema & Bowman, 2017; Brown et al., 2019; Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2015; Samura, 2016). Although these designs may be particularly beneficial for enhancing students' social well-being, the current study suggests that intrapersonal, psychological well-being is tied to being able to create a space that reflects one's identity. Because flourishing is multidimensional, it is valuable to know the potentially distinct ways in which different forms

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of well-being can be promoted by the campus environment.

In contrast to place identity, attachment to one's housing proved to be unrelated to any of these measures of well-being. Attachment is characterized in terms of one's emotional bond to a setting, and it is most evident when people seek out that place during times of stress. In light of these characteristics, it is likely that attachment is more closely related to how one copes with negative life events. Thus, the benefits of attachment may be more evident for those dealing with actual mental illnesses, without necessarily contributing to the flourishing entailed in a eudaimonic framework for mental health. However, further research is needed to demonstrate this possibility.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are several important limitations to note in this study. First, because this data is cross-sectional, any causal relationships supported in this analysis are purely theoretical. It is, for example, possible that individuals high in positive affect, autonomy, and self-regulatory ability are more likely to create highly self-

referential spaces. However, place identity was largely unassociated with any of the Big Five personality factors, suggesting that it is likely independent of preexisting, stable traits. Nevertheless, a longitudinal analysis is needed to better evaluate causal hypotheses and the relational pathways posed here. If identification with one's housing does help produce greater psychological well-being among students, an assessment of place identity at the beginning of a term should predict positive changes in well-being later in that term.

Another important caveat to these conclusions is that although each individual's measures were assessed independently, in reality 92% of these participants shared their room with at least one other person. It is almost certainly the case that one's sense of place identity is going to be closely associated with the attitudes, behaviors, and emotions of one's roommate—particularly in terms of being either aligned or in conflict (Erlandson, 2012). Thus, future research should employ a dyadic methodology (Kenny, 1996; Kenny et al., 2006) to assess the extent to which these variables are interdependent among cohabitants. Moreover,

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individual differences in exactly how students create a place they identify with is also worth exploring. For example, Hansen and Altman (1976) suggested that the type of marking students engaged in may have differential effects on attrition. It is therefore quite possible that, in the same way, certain types of spatial adaptations are more likely to produce flourishing than are others.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the current study was conducted at a single college with a largely unrepresentative student body, thereby limiting its ability to generalize to other more diverse university contexts. Most notably, this sample was predominantly White, and issues related to belongingness, attachment, and sense of place are even more relevant for minority students (Kirby et al., 2020). It is possible, for example, that students may have an even stronger emotional and psychologi-

cal connection to their own space when they feel that the broader campus has a climate that lacks inclusivity. Thus, it would be valuable to know whether students' attitudes toward their residences has a distinct effect on flourishing among underrepresented groups.

IMPLICATIONS

Millions of dollars are spent by colleges and universities developing and maintaining buildings and common spaces on their campuses, representing a large percentage of institution expenditure (Godshall, 2000). Establishing best practices for how places on campus should be designed is therefore of critical importance for college and university administrators. The findings from this study suggest several strategies for practitioners seeking to create a residence hall most likely to facilitate place identity.

First, for new buildings that are being constructed, it is important to advocate for architectural design that provides students with a sense of control over their own space and the capacity to alter it as much as possible. This approach requires eschewing many traditional design models. Because student housing is inherently temporary, and because negative stereotypes exist about the responsibility and safety of students, there is a common tendency to err on the side of caution and design housing with what Sommer (1974) called *hard architecture*: spaces that prioritize standardization, indestructibility, and clearly prescribed usage. Similar tendencies can be observed in the design of many hospitals and prisons, along with their associated psychological costs (Wener, 2012). Spaces with *soft architecture*, on the other hand, reflect the presence of unique

human beings by being adaptable, customizable, and capable of being used in a variety of ways. In addition to simply providing a more pleasant, humane place for students to reside, there is also the potential for multiple psychological benefits. Second, beyond advocating for the design of customizable new buildings, it is also important to support more positive, effective use of existing physical space. Students benefit psychologically from having a personalized place on campus. Thus, residence life staff, advisors, and counseling services should find ways to encourage students to adapt their own housing, and policies should provide them with the freedom to customize their existing environments. To be able to create a space of their own, students need to have the permission, the capacity, and the motivation to personalize their environment. Promoting this behavior can be accomplished by giving them greater access to the necessary resources (e.g., coupons/discounts for posters and decorations at the campus book store), offering additional incentives to think and care about their space (e.g., a contest for most creatively designed room), or establishing explicit norms for self-expression in the building at large (e.g.,

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collectively customizing communal areas and hallways). In this way, students can feel empowered to more easily see themselves in the places they live.

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Discussion Questions

1. As suggested by Meagher, flourishing can be defined, in part, by social well-being. That considered, is a positive sense of self and others' perception of a person's space reflected in their social capital? In other words, if a resident has an aesthetically pleasing or socially accepted space on campus, does this win them social capital points?
2. How can residents' financial condition contribute to disparities in social well-being?
3. Without embarking on costly renovation, in what ways can corridor-style housing be reimagined to foster a sense of community similar to apartment or suite-style facilities?
4. How might GPA- or credit-aligned housing selection be modified to enact a more just process? In what ways would this enhance positive perceptions of one's campus residential space?
5. Who should be responsible for assessing and contributing to the development of housing policies that pertain to décor and residential spaces? How can including students in this process enhance positive perception of residence hall spaces?

Discussion questions developed by Hannah Hench, Mount Aloysius College, and Denise L. Davidson, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania.