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## CHAPTER 5

# Building Community in Árbol de la Vida

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**B**uilding community has been part of the mission of the University of Arizona Honors College since its founding in 1962. In 2011, a new honors residence hall opened that epitomizes its community of scholars. This essay explores how an honors hall—through its design and programming—can build community, emphasize sustainability, facilitate learning, and encourage an outward focus. This housing experience reinforces the values and goals of honors education and contributes to a personalized, close-knit community in the context of a large, public university.

### **BEGINNINGS OF HONORS HOUSING**

The University of Arizona Honors College has an enduring partnership with the Office of Residence Life that has evolved over time. Yuma Hall was designated as honors housing in 1988. Built in 1937, this classic hall fit Residence Life's interest in living-learning

communities. This experience demonstrated to Residence Life that honors students were a unique population comprising an engaged and responsible community. Although the honors students experienced the familiar and inevitable roommate problems and transition to college issues, they had different kinds of problems: studying too much, anxiety about grades, and sleep deprivation from being over-committed. Because Residence Life experienced fewer problems with honors students than are typically found in non-honors housing, their interest in honors housing grew. The honors college's interest in providing more honors housing was growing as well because of the increase in the number of students. In the 22 years that have passed between the appearance of the first and now the latest hall, four different residence halls have been designated for honors housing. Yuma Hall has provided important continuity and price differentiation in honors housing. Without doubt, the latest hall is by far the most exciting and uniquely designed built environment on the University of Arizona campus.

Housing on campus is not guaranteed, and students are not required to live on campus. Tensions have emerged because of the size and scope of honors housing. Honors housing usually fills quite early in the housing cycle. Honors students who apply late may not have the choice to live in an honors hall; consequently, honors students live in every hall on campus. Some honors students prefer living in non-honors halls because of the location, price, or emphasis of a given hall (e.g., Engineering, Fine Arts, Management). Because honors halls have fewer behavioral problems, Residence Life has been interested in designating larger halls as honors. In contrast, the honors college always thought of community building in a smaller context—houses of 180–240 students—until a new larger hall, *Árbol de la Vida* (Tree of Life), was designated for honors.

Significant support to generate more attractive honors housing came from UA President Peter Likins, who in 1995 emphasized that recruitment of honors students was an institutional priority. This altered the campus culture and encouraged various units to partner more with honors. For example, the honors college

relationship with Residence Life strengthened significantly during this time period as evidenced by growth in the number of honors spaces and the first newly constructed hall designated for honors students, Posada San Pedro, in 2005. With the addition of Posada San Pedro as a third hall, honors housing could accommodate 618 students. Despite this expansion, the demand continued to exceed the spaces available, and honors housing filled early in the recruitment cycle.

## **DESIGNING AN HONORS COMMUNITY**

James Van Arsdel, Assistant Vice President of Residence Life and University Housing, had honors in mind early in the design of Árbol de la Vida. He envisioned a community where ideas and conversation flowed in and out of the spaces, a place where students would be known for their individuality yet strongly bonded to one another through similar interests. Ben de Rubertis, the architect for the hall, an associate of AR7 Architects, Denver, Colorado, was inspired by European plazas and courtyards and hoped to create a marketplace of ideas similar to the Greek *stoa*. In describing his goals, de Rubertis (2011) imagined the scene of a family bringing their son or daughter to college:

We know we can't replace what a college student is leaving: family life cannot be replaced by architecture. But we thought that the structure of a residence hall and the structure of a student's academic life could merge and, therefore, support the journey. Our overarching hope is that it provides a structure that comforts, stimulates, and challenges student residents and the campus as a whole.

Van Arsdel was able to create a vision and invest incredible attention in the details to make this vision a reality because of his extensive experience with Residence Life: he had been at the University of Arizona 25 years when ground was broken for Árbol de la Vida. He had built five residence halls, overseen the conversion and renovation of a Greek fraternity house into a hall, and led

several major building renewal projects. His thoughtfulness and deep understanding of all aspects of the design, construction, and functionality of residence halls made all the difference in the conceptualization and implementation of this honors hall.\*

Árbol de la Vida is composed of five buildings, structures that are connected through open spaces, with a large patio on the ground floor, and by bridges on the upper levels. Land is a limited resource on campus so the site utilizes a modern urban design that maximizes the height and footprint of the building. The hall houses 719 students in 231,882 square feet of living space. Although the complex is large, the floors are small neighborhoods, housing approximately 32 students in double rooms. The project provides a transition between the residential neighborhood across the street and campus; the buildings facing the street and residential homes are four stories tall, but five and six stories are used for the interior buildings, which are adjacent to a nine-story hall. The buildings are named for five characteristics of a strong and vibrant community: Alma (Soul), Bondad (Goodness), Cariño (Affection), Destino (Destiny), and Esperanza (Hope).

Throughout the hall, an interesting interplay of elements encourages both community and individuality. Van Arsdal wanted the corridors to have “brilliant corners” so the architects worked to bring in natural light. The hallways flare out, creating gathering places at each end with comfortable furniture that draws people into conversation. The doors are recessed from the halls to create a front porch effect; residents can talk to someone in front of their room—on their porch—and have privacy. The doors are offset so that residents cannot peer into their neighbors’ room when the doors open simultaneously.

Like a village, common spaces bring students together. The buildings are arranged around oblique courtyards with corridors that feel like small streets. Glass walls enable those strolling by to see who is there and what is going on. The public areas include two

\*The project cost approximately \$90,000,000, including the furnishings and art work. The university builds and operates its own residence halls and finances the projects with bonds.

laundries, two media lounges, a large recreation room and kitchen area, and five meeting rooms. Taking advantage of the warm Arizona climate, the open air, central courtyard features outdoor seating, a barbeque, and a large desert garden with trees and flowering shrubs. The main courtyard is framed by two great rooms, each with its own grand piano, where students gather to socialize or study. Two exercise rooms occupy the floor above the great rooms.

Many characteristic features of the Southwest landscape are incorporated into the design. A central concept for the building is a slot canyon, a natural phenomenon that is deep and narrow. As hikers wander through a slot canyon, they cannot see very far ahead and yet are awed by the forces that created the deep channels. Here the slot canyon functions as a metaphor for an honors education: exploratory and wandering, deep yet directed. The arrangement of the buildings mimics a canyon with relatively narrow spaces between tall structures. The building utilizes natural light with glass walls for public spaces including hallways, study rooms, and meeting rooms; all the residents' rooms have exterior windows. The main patio features lighting that mimics moonlight and bathes the landscaped canyon between the buildings in a blue glow.

The most prominent image of the slot canyon faces the intersecting streets and the Tucson community: a large copper-colored screen with small punches set at angles creates an image of a slot canyon. Residents in the enclosed study room can see out, but the screen limits visibility into the hall. Not only does this two-story screen create a remarkable view from the street, but it also provides a cushion of air that insulates the windows.

## **ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Sustainability is a passion of honors students. They have been leaders in getting the campus to go green: lobbying the administration to create a sustainability fund, working to bring solar panels to campus, creating a community garden, initiating a composting project in the Student Union, and organizing teams to recycle plastic water bottles after athletic events and homecoming. Their interest and leadership resulted in making sustainability a central

feature of *Árbol de la Vida*, the first LEED-certified platinum building on the UA campus.

The buildings are arranged to maximize shading and to create a well-sealed and insulated envelope. The south-facing windows have awnings that maximize the shade during the hottest seasons. The north-south orientation shades the open air corridors between the buildings. The decorative, metal window screens cool large windows and provide architectural design elements. The lighting design and HVAC systems were selected to reduce energy use. Each student room has a large window that provides a generous amount of daylight and opens to provide ventilation; the windows also have two sets of coverings, one for partial coverage and one that blocks out all light so that late-night studiers can sleep late in the morning. The rooms are smart rooms where the lights turn themselves off if they do not detect movement. Students who are immersed in study have to move their arms periodically to turn the lights back on. The temperature also adjusts if no movement is detected for a set number of minutes and adjusts even more after a longer interval. In other words, rooms are not heated or cooled when students venture home for the weekend. As I tell the students, the rooms are smart, but they are not smart enough to pick up their clothes.

Water is conserved because the bathrooms feature low-flow showerheads and dual-flush toilets. Solar panels on the roof provide a significant portion of the hot water; bathroom floors are made from a conglomerate material that includes recycled glass. Their extruded construction means that there are no seams or grout, which allows for easy maintenance and cleaning. The hall uses green housekeeping and has a light bulb and battery exchange program. The complex has a large recycling area, and sustainability education takes places throughout the year.

The building's nod to the Arizona environment extends to the landscaping plan, which replicates the desert environment by utilizing native plants and species that are suitable in this climate. Moreover, some of the plants are recycled because the succulents for the grounds are obtained through a plant rescue program. Drought-tolerant plants line the perimeter of the building. The slot

canyons between the buildings and in the patio feature riparian plants and trees. The landscaping incorporates passive water harvesting through site grading that slows runoff. Large basins in the courtyard capture runoff that will be used for deep-root watering. The rainwater from the roofs is channeled through runnels that wander down the corridors between buildings. The sound of the water rushing after a storm and blue lights in the runnels in the evening create a magical effect.

Living in this carefully crafted environment, students are reminded of sustainability on a daily basis. In the lobby, students can check the energy kiosk to see how much energy is used in Árbol Hall and compare that energy usage to other halls on campus, especially those with a green design. Students even have the ability to study energy usage in specific locations within the complex at different times of the day. The kiosk encourages students to think about and investigate consumption and conservation. Because students adapt so well to this green environment, they are often surprised, for example, when they return home for several days to an environment where lights remain on unless someone consciously turns them off. Thus students realize the importance of design, technology, and their own habits and practices in promoting a sustainable environment. Many students are active in various sustainability clubs on campus. One faculty fellow, John Pollard, who is assigned to Árbol, advises the SolarCats, a student club that brings environmentally conscious students together in an effort to harness solar energy as a power source for the university.

## **MAKING INTELLECTUAL LIFE CENTRAL**

As soon as Árbol de la Vida was designated as honors housing, Residence Life and the honors college began meeting monthly to make plans for the building, create a close-knit working group, and coordinate programming. This partnership enabled honors' interests to be central to the new hall. The intellectual and academic tone of the hall is evident from the point of entry, a glass wall called the "Poetree." Etched on the glass are trees that mirror the trees planted in front of the building. Upon closer inspection, spectators can see

that the etchings are actual lines of poetry, many about nature, the environment, and the Southwest. The honors faculty and administrators selected the passages.

Academics are a centerpiece of the residential experience and the architecture of the hall. The separate buildings are connected by bridges, and the largest and most prominent of these connects the eastern and western corridors at the third floor with a two-story study bridge with glass walls so that students are highly visible when they are studying there. The bridge has small tables that can be moved around as study groups form. On the upper levels of the study bridge, two Mediascapes allow students to work simultaneously on a computer with interconnected keyboards, to see each other's work, and to collaborate; several honors professors build Mediascape technology into their assignments. Each floor boasts two or three study rooms with white boards for collaboration; these areas also feature glass walls so that folks can be seen studying. One study room on each floor is designated as a quiet space. Students can reserve the meeting rooms on the first floor for study sessions, clubs, and programs. Students often reserve the media room so they can watch films related to specific classes.

The larger meeting rooms, which hold 15 to 20 people, are scheduled for honors seminars. For example, each freshman enrolls in a small, discussion-based seminar for 16 or fewer students. Faculty for the honors seminars are drawn from the ranks of Regents Professors, Distinguished University Professors, and other internationally known scholars. The classrooms can be configured in different ways because of the movable tables and chairs; each room has a white board and projectors. The honors college maintains a supply of connectors so that faculty and students can easily connect different computers when they are working in the classrooms.

Faculty love teaching in the hall and often stay after class to interact with students. Students, in turn, like walking by these rooms after class and witnessing their friends and professors still carrying on a lively discussion or debate.

The tradition at the University of Arizona is to minimize the number of offices in the residence halls and to limit the

administrative functions because the halls are seen as students' space. Árbol has seven offices: two for community directors, one to support residence, two for the honors recruitment and outreach team, one for the coordinator of the First-Year Program, and one for honors advising. The honors advisors talk with students about study abroad, course choices, engagement experiences, and their honors educational plan. The First-Year Program coordinator plans programs and events for freshmen, advises the Honors Mentor Association, and directs the First-Year Research Project program. Other staff members have rotating office hours in the hall. The counselor for Nationally Competitive Scholarships meets with students to urge them to think about applying for these prestigious awards. The program coordinator for Student Engagement interacts with students who are interested in internships, community service, leadership, research, and other opportunities available both in the honors college and across campus. The offices facilitate interaction because they are convenient and visible; moreover, students get to know staff easily in this environment.

The University of Arizona also places Faculty Fellows in the residence halls, the Greek houses, and the on-campus cultural centers and other locations where students gather. Faculty Fellows are professors who teach undergraduates and spend time interacting with students. They do not have offices in the hall but use the common spaces to meet with students. Because Árbol de la Vida is a large hall, it has two Faculty Fellows; John Pollard from Chemistry has been a constant presence, and Karen Zimmerman from Art, Melissa Fitch from Spanish and Portuguese, and Supapan Seraphin from Material Science and Engineering have also served in this capacity. Professor Pollard teaches the introductory chemistry sequence. He also provides advice to students who are selecting a major from the many options within the College of Science. An avid biker, Pollard often leads bike rides in the Tucson community. He observes that students in the hall have a greater awareness of social and environmental issues than students in other residences on campus. Professor Seraphin enjoys cooking Thai food, and students join her in preparing a meal that typically feeds around

150 students. She encourages students to study abroad and to find research opportunities on campus or during the summer months. She is adept at reminding ambitious and over-committed students about their long-term goals and at helping them pace themselves to avoid burnout. The Faculty Fellows add an academic dimension to the hall while providing enormous social support. Along with the residence life staff, they can reach out to students who are experiencing difficulties in school or in their personal lives in a meaningful and potent way because their relationship and involvement with the students transcend the classroom.

The residence life staff, including the community directors, are either honors students or former honors students. Both community directors were honors undergraduates, one at Arizona and the other at another university. All of the resident assistants in the honors halls are current honors students who are familiar with the honors college and its benefits and opportunities. These RAs receive a copy of the Common Reading text provided to all freshmen at orientation and create programs connected to the theme of the reading. Honors staff participate in RA training so that the RAs are clear about their role and understand the difference between academic and peer advising. Many of the RAs are tutors at the Think Tank, the UA tutoring and academic skills center on campus. These RAs post messages on Facebook to announce when and where they will be available for tutoring, general questions, and review sessions. Even in an honors hall, freshmen need encouragement to study and develop sound time-management skills. Early in the semester, the RAs tell their floor members when they will be in the study room and encourage residents to join them.

The hall has two apartments, one used for a community director and the other for visiting artists and scholars. The honors college coordinates the use of the apartment by alumni, scholars, and artists. This two-bedroom apartment is fully furnished, complete with copies of the Honors College Common Readings and University of Arizona Press selections about the Southwest. In addition to a public lecture or teaching, each guest interacts with students at an event in the hall, usually over a meal, and shares insights about his

or her career and life. Students have enjoyed a variety of visiting artists and scholars from physicians and professors to journalists and scientists. Alumni in particular love the opportunity to interact with students in the hall and often become role models and mentors.

## **A COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS**

Specific design features in Árbol actually encourage conversation. The gathering places created at the ends of each floor by the flared hallways were intended by the architect to “extend the threshold of the individual rooms, and in doing so, we hope they extend the discussion, extend the debate, and extend the vigor of learning into the realm of the student’s home and community” (de Robertis, 2011). These gathering places not only invite people into them, they invite conversations. The design of the study rooms, exercise rooms, recreation room, and small meeting rooms draw residents into them and into conversation; a student walking by a study room can see who is working there and, therefore, be more inclined to stop to visit. Even the selection of art with an international or abstract theme was designed to encourage conversation and interpretation. Each study room, gathering place, great room, and common space has art; even the courtyard features mobile sculptures. Photographs from the honors college study abroad courses are featured throughout the hall.

These conversations prompted students to initiate two new organizations in the first year that the hall was open. A senior RA called together a group of residents interested in biomedical careers because he was concerned about the necessity and difficulty of being able to read and understand research articles. The Honors College Biomedical Journal Club was born. The students select journal articles to read and sometimes invite faculty to come to the hall to participate in the discussions. A second group of students was interested in the healing effects of music. They asked me to sponsor a club of musicians who would perform for patients in local hospitals. To date, they have performed at the University Hospital, Tucson Medical Center, and the VA hospital. Their second

goal, which they hope to accomplish this year, is to play music with patients who are musicians. They found a faculty member studying the effects of music on healing and hope to connect their activities to this research.

An important mission of the honors college is to help students develop a commitment to promote social responsibility throughout their lives. The college encourages a global perspective through courses built around international issues, the theme of the Common Reading Program, and study abroad. Honors college staff worked closely with Árbol Residence Life staff to ensure that programming reinforces the outward-looking vistas that are featured in the housing complex.

Before the hall had opened, a resident assistant approached me about sponsoring an alternative spring break. His perspective had been opened up by an internship in Peru, and he really wanted to organize an international, alternative break program. Spring break is too short for such an excursion, but he organized a trip to San Francisco where students worked at the AIDS Foundation, in a homeless shelter, and for a food bank. The students found that this was a significant learning experience where they witnessed firsthand the complexity of social issues and had the satisfaction of making a difference. The alternative spring break has become an ongoing program for students that helps to expand their horizons through community service.

The goal in Árbol de la Vida was to build community by creating small neighborhoods within a larger community; to encourage conversations and interactions that would flow across majors, floors and buildings, classrooms, and living spaces; and to weave together a diverse set of individuals. If what students and faculty report is true, this goal has been achieved.

## REFERENCE

de Robertis, Ben. (2011, September 24). What we hoped to achieve, and what seems important to us, at Likins Hall and Árbol de La Vida [architect's remarks at hall dedication].