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Montreal's Campus1 a shining example of changing student-housing design

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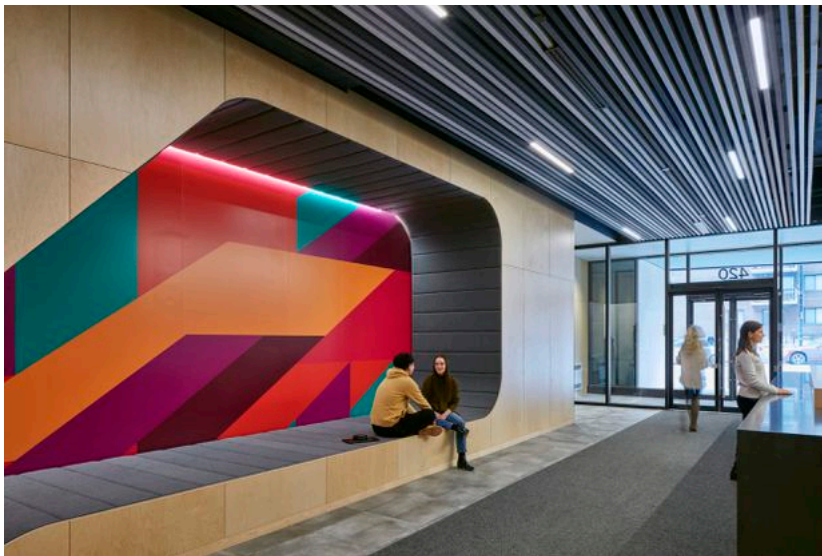
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Campus1, the recently opened residence on Sherbrooke Street West in Montreal.

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The folks at Toronto-based branding and environmental design firm Entro are confident they have succeeded in helping transform a former Holiday Inn in downtown Montreal into an attractive, convivial space for students.

A bold graphic treatment throughout the 19-storey building uses a multicoloured palette and abstract shapes with prominence given to red in a nod to the official colour of nearby McGill University.

The recently opened residence on Sherbrooke Street West, called Campus1, is part of Toronto-based Knightstone Capital Management Inc.'s growing chain of student-housing facilities.

Campus1 is not formally affiliated with any one institution but is intended to provide much-needed student housing in a city that boasts four universities.

Managed by Canadian Campus Communities (a subsidiary of American Campus Communities, the largest private dormitory manager in the United States), the 886-bed facility represents the latest attempt in efforts by players in the sector to enhance the academic experience with residences far-removed from the drab, cinder block dormitories of yore.

“Knightstone wanted us to express something a little more bold. We wanted to create an elevated student-residence experience,” Entro partner Rae Lam said during a recent guided tour of the facility.

“We feel that the brand component resonates with users.”

Designed by Diamond Schmitt Architects of Toronto, Campus1 bills itself as “luxury urban living.” Amenities include a ground-floor “Inspiration Room” for informal gatherings, movie nights and other events, a cardio and yoga studio, a fully equipped fitness centre and mini basketball court, a cafeteria and a games room.



Campus1 is designed by Diamond Schmitt Architects of Toronto.

JAMES BRITAIN/JAMES BRITAIN

There has been much talk in recent years about heightened competition – dubbed an “amenities arms race” by some – in the student-housing market. Private-sector developers and investment funds are increasingly active in the space, as cash-strapped universities look to outsource their student housing projects while still keen to fuel future growth with an ever-expanding student population.

Higher-end residences, in particular, have garnered a lot of attention.

“Universities are probably responding to competitive pressures. That is, if they didn’t build such high-end residences they would be at a disadvantage with other universities in attracting students,” Brian McCall, professor of education, economics and public policy at the University of Michigan, said in an email.

Research in a paper he wrote with two colleagues – College as Country Club: Do Colleges Cater to Students’ Preferences for Consumption? – indicates that “all but the top high school student achievers place more weight on non-academic amenities than academic quality when choosing a university,” Mr. McCall said.

“In short, this is being driven by student demand.”

But Kevin McClure, assistant professor of higher education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, wonders if the extent of the posh-student-living trend hasn’t been somewhat overblown. “We actually don’t have a very good handle on whether or not there is a trend,” he said in an interview.

“The majority of on-campus residence halls are still very much you’re traditional cinder block, traditional buildings.”

The jury is out, too, on the relative merits of amenities-rich, hotel-style accommodations compared with the more traditional dormitory-style model.

Some studies go so far as to suggest that offering too many lifestyle perks and distractions can have a negative effect on academic performance. Other research indicates that hotel-style suites offer fewer occasions for crucial social interaction than traditional residences. Social interaction is deemed a key factor contributing to student wellness and mental health, which in turn enhance academic performance.



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JAMES BRITAIN/JAMES BRITAIN

Indeed, wellness now ranks high on universities' checklist of student housing priorities. What's important, say some experts, is the active promotion of well-being and not how many luxury features or comforts on offer. Of course, Campus1 and other facilities that follow a similar business model offer various student-support programs and activities.

Mr. McCall says it's still unclear whether or not non-academic amenities are hurting students in terms of academic achievement. He is currently researching whether increasing amenities reduces student drop-out.

Avi Friedman, professor of architecture at McGill University, says North American student residences lag their European counterparts not only in terms of smart design and sustainability ideas but also in innovation on the social and learning experience fronts.

"Some places [in Europe] recognize that having the students in the community is a resource to tap into," he said in an interview.

The Netherlands, for example, boasts a successful experiment in intergenerational living.

Long-term senior care facility Humanitas Deventer allows a small group of students to live there for free. In return, the students must put in at least 30 hours a month engaging with the senior residents.

The students not only benefit from having a significant financial burden lifted from their shoulders but also learn from and forge enriching relationships with the elders.

The seniors – often cruelly cut off from meaningful participation in society – in turn get support, stimulation and a sense of belonging.

At the University of Utah, Lassonde Studios is a “Live/Learn” multipurpose space combining a 400-bed residence with a 20,000-square-foot innovation hangar – dubbed the “garage” and equipped with 3-D printer and laser cutters – where budding entrepreneurial students can design and prototype their startup ideas. The award-winning facility received financial backing from Canadian mining magnate Pierre Lassonde.

Lassonde Studios provides a mix of different types of living space: pods or small rooms equipped with built-in bed, desk and storage; industrial-style lofts with a shared kitchen and lounge; and more conventional single or double rooms. Each residential floor has a specific theme: games and digital media; adventure and gear; product design; and sustainability and global impact.

At Montreal’s Concordia University, the accent is on fostering relationships and community spirit.

Lauren Farley, director of residence life, says her institution puts a premium on the role of social connection in the residences.

“We really are that traditional style dorm housing,” she said, adding: “If we were to expand we would look at different models.”

For now, the emphasis is on communal spaces and creating a robust supportive framework, she said.

At the former Grey Nuns convent in downtown Montreal, converted into a Concordia student residence several years ago, each floor has a kitchenette/lounge. A contingent of residential assistants, second- or third-year students who live in the residence and are there to mentor and help the first-years.

“You could put whatever amenities you want, but upper-level students offering support is what makes the difference,” Ms. Farley said.

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