In 2008, when Suzy Nelson, then Harvard College’s associate dean for residential life, approached Richard Wrangham and Elizabeth Ross about becoming master and co-master of Currier House, she suggested that it was good to eat with students a few times a week. “Elizabeth wrinkled her nose,” recalls Wrangham, Moore professor of biological anthropology—not at the students’ company, but at memories of institutional food. Nonetheless, they took the job and, on returning in September from Uganda, moved hurriedly into Currier without unpacking their cooking gear, and so immediately ate in the house dining hall with their new charges. After that, “it was sometime in late November,” Ross recalls, “when we ate our first meal not with students.” The Dining Services food was fine, and “it’s just fun being with students, getting to know them,” she says. The couple had raised three sons to adulthood in suburban Weston, in a house they’ve now sold. “We had an empty nest,” says Wrangham. “We filled it with 370 Currier students.”

This kind of informal contact between masters and house residents, senior faculty and undergraduates, may seem unexceptional to College alumni, but it’s rare in American higher education. The only true counterpart to Harvard’s house system as a way to lodge, feed, and educate upperclassmen is an analogous arrangement at Yale (where the units are called “colleges”). At many universities, undergraduates do not even live in dormitories. After freshman year, “at elite state universities, off-campus living is the norm,” says Stephen Lassonde, who arrived at Harvard as dean of student life this year after six years at Brown University and 14 at Yale. Well over 90 percent of University of Michigan upperclassmen, for example, live off campus.

Even within the Ivy League, Harvard and Yale are atypical. “For an urban university to have 97 to 98 percent of its undergraduates living on campus [as at Harvard] is unheard of,” says dean of freshmen Thomas Dingman. (At the University of Pennsylvania, about 51 percent of undergraduates live off campus.) “Of course, the high rents in Cambridge help keep those numbers up,” Dingman adds, “but students perceive that the game in town is in the houses.” Lassonde observes that at the great majority of universities, Brown included, even when dorms are available, “It’s a migratory community—students live in a different building each year. There’s clear age segregation: outside the classroom, the students don’t encounter faculty or other adults. So their sense of what the world is like is very constrained by their peer culture. In my opinion, [the house system] is a much healthier way to live, grow, and develop.”

“The issue of sustaining an intergenerational learning community is really vital,” says Wertham professor Diana Eck, master since 1998 of Lowell House, sharing duties with co-master Dorothy Austin, lecturer on psychology. “Of course, at every college there are residences—fraternities, sororities, dorms. When they move into a house at Harvard, one of the first things sophomores discover is that it’s not a dorm. Yes, it is a place to live, but it’s much more than that. It’s a place where they are in face-to-face contact with each other when they struggle in to breakfast and read the newspaper together, where they come back for lunch and find the place buzzing, where they bring their teaching fellow or a friend over for dinner. It becomes the most important site for their education.”

The University clearly agrees, and has launched a $5-billion-plus, multiyear plan to renovate the 12 undergraduate houses—an enormous, complex project that will figure prominently in the newly launched capital campaign.

Last year, renovations began in the older part of Quincy House; this September, students moved back into the building, now renamed Stone Hall after the Harvard Corporation’s late senior fellow, Robert G. Stone Jr. ’45, LL.D. ’03. Work on Leverett House’s McKinlock Hall started in June, along with exterior work on the smallest of the so-called River Houses, Dunster, which will be the first house fully renovated.

The project is a clear declaration in favor of a residential college, of on-campus living, of a “brick-and-mortar” campus, and of an intergenerational, face-to-face learning environment—all obvious continuities with the past. But Harvard’s affirmation of these things now is significant, in an evolving higher-education era of distance learning, online universities, MOOCs (massive open online courses, including those offered by Harvard through its edX partnership), digitized libraries, and open-source knowledge.

Of course, education via digital media has many limitations. “Those soul-searching, face-to-face conversations are harder to do online,” says Dingman. “One of our best assets here is learning from each other,” says Stephanie Ralston Khurana, co-master of Cabot House. “That’s peer-led learning, co-learning. It’s not just downloading knowledge from faculty brains.” Eck adds, “No one imagines that the social networks of Facebook and LinkedIn are the sustaining connections. Being in touch means touch, actually. Community is where the sparks of energy fly—where creativity, life, and growth happen. It is the main point of life, actually.”

Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Michael D. Smith says he often hears students say, “Harvard is a large, complex place, with all these graduate schools, all these activities. Where can I go to feel grounded again?” The houses are structured to give students a feeling of community, home, caring—a place where there is ‘somebody who really cares about how I am doing.’

“You see the strength of the house system when the commu-

Learning, and Life, in the Houses

The singular character of the College’s residences, now in renewal

by CRAIG LAMBERT

Photographs by Jim Harrison
nity is under stress,” he continues. “After the terrorist bombing of
the Boston Marathon, several communities, including Cambridge,
were in lockdown for a day with a suspect at large. Students cared
deeply about those working in the houses, like dining-hall staff,
who might not have been able to get to their jobs on time, and said,
‘We’ll cover it for you—we’re all in this together, like a family.’”

There was, perhaps, a time when Harvard’s preeminence sprang
from having the largest university library and a highly distinguished
faculty. “Well, Google is digitizing all the books, and now the facul-
ty is on YouTube,” says Cabot House master Rakesh Khurana, Bow-
er professor of leadership development at Harvard Business School.
“So, the question you have to ask is: what is the value proposition of
face-to-face learning? If you use technology to complement that and
think it through strategically, you can automate the rote elements
and spend more time on the meaningful interactions that can’t be du-
plicated online. We have got to curate that aspect.

“Each spring,” he continues, “Stephanie and I talk to seniors
before they graduate, and we ask them, ‘What were the things
that really affected you here?’ They talk about conversations
with friends about important subjects or face-to-face experi-
ences with their faculty. They talk about extracurricular experi-
ences: putting on a show, working in a lab. They don’t often talk
about just wrestling with a book. What we used to call extracur-
ricular is increasingly curricular for our students.”

Jesse Nee-Vogelman ’13, a Slavic languages and literatures con-
centrator in Cabot House, remarks that “academics make up a
tremendously small portion of what going to college is about.
Most of what I learned came out of interacting with my fellow
students and friends. You are becoming an adult, and you need
to be with people who are going through the same things that
you are, in order to process that change.” Shaun Chaudhuri ’15,
an economics concentrator in Eliot House, agrees: “When you’re
going through a process of trial and error, it helps to have some-
one who’s making just as many errors as you are.” He adds, “If you
don’t engage in the social aspects of college, you’ll lose 80 percent
of the potential to grow and mature as an individual.”

An Adams House history and literature concentrator, Ethan
Hardy ’14, says, “I think there’s great power, something very
special, about having a group of people together for four years.
It’s one reason people are so attached to Harvard, and why you
have a thousand people coming back for their fifth reunion. At
most other schools, people have moved off-campus by their
sophomore year, and you might have to drive 20 minutes to get
to class.” Hardy, who also is a member of the Harvard Lampoon,
Hasty Pudding Theatricals, and the Signet Society, adds, “House
life, extracurricular life, and academic life are all so intertwined.
It creates a great sense of attachment.”
“The boundary between classroom learning and the rest of life should be more porous,” says Michael Smith. “I believe in education happening everywhere, through all your activities—your contacts with fellow students, visitors, tutors, and masters, the diversity of the people you associate with.”

Each of the 12 houses is home to roughly 350 to 500 undergraduates. “That’s a good number,” says Dingman. “I’ve been to places where there are dormitories of a thousand or so students, and it’s got a very different feel.” Each house also has a couple dozen resident tutors, maybe half that many nonresident tutors, and affiliated faculty and staff who belong to the Senior Common Room (SCR) and interact with students as well as with each other. In such a residential community, says Lassonde, “Everybody is learning how to live with others.”

Various house-based activities—from intramural athletics to Arabic, Chinese, and even French Creole tables to late-night grillrooms to theater productions and musical concerts—cement bonds. “The houses serve as a wonderful ground for amateurism,” says Dingman. He notes that at the annual Cabot House musical this year, “all sorts of people who didn’t have the talent for a Loeb Mainstage show were able to perform, alongside writing a thesis or working a term-time job.” He recalls Sean Kelly ’03, who had worked throughout high school to help his family financially, and continued working term-time jobs at Harvard. As a junior, he tried out for the Cabot musical, got the lead role, “and absolutely flourished,” Dingman says. “Sean found out what a ham he was and how much he could enjoy being in front of a room. He put that together with his passion for history and decided to be a teacher. Today he is as happy as can be in front of a high-school classroom.”

The entire panoply of activities is, of course, freely chosen. “Forced communities can make me feel very claustrophobic,” observes Nee-Vogelman. “What I like about the house system is that you can be as involved as you want to be. When I need a community I can participate, and when I need my own space, it doesn’t clutter me.”

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, and mentoring by older, admired teachers, can be crucial to motivating students and crystallizing careers. Sociologist Sherry Turkle ’69, Ph.D. ‘76, Mauzé professor of the social studies of science and technology at MIT, whose most recent book is Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other, asks, “If you wanted me to fall in love with qualitative social science, will that happen in my room looking at a screen and taking five-minute tests, or by putting me in a lecture hall with 150 other students, hearing a lecture by David Riesman or Erik Erikson? And wondering if maybe I could be like David Riesman or Erik Erikson? You are experiencing a great mind in the process of thinking. People’s minds do wander during lectures, but often they are wondering to, ‘What would it be like to think like that?’ We’re forgetting the emotional side of active learning.”

Regarding other emotional dimensions, Turkle adds, “There are studies that show depression in adolescents to be associated with high amounts of media use, media multitasking, and social-media use. Multitasking is clearly a problem; social-media use remains controversial. But most important is the dramatic research on what makes people feel good: what gets them out of depression, energized, motivated to learn, is face-to-face communication.”

Sports teams, music ensembles, and theater projects, of course,
Social life and education have long overlapped, collided, and shaped each other at Harvard. Harry Lewis owns a large collection of Harvard course catalogs, and he can show how, in the 1840s, the “catalog” could occupy a single grid with hours of the day down the side and days of the week across the top. Within each cell were just four lines, designating subjects that freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors would be taking at that time. There was no choice. “The social unit was your class year,” Lewis explains. “By the end of senior year, you had sat next to the same guy for eight hours a day, six days a week, for four years.” President Charles William Eliot removed this rigidity from the curriculum, phasing in an elective system during his presidency (1869-1909) that eventually allowed students to take any combination of courses they chose, which broke down those class-year barriers.

The College nearly quintupled in size under Eliot (graduating about 125 students in 1869 and more than 500 in 1900), and students “did not eat together (unless they were in a final or waiting club) or live together, and no longer had their social bonds formed by classroom experiences,” says Lewis. In 1900, a gift from Major Henry Lee Higginson, A.B. 1855, established the Harvard Union as a place to give ordinary students the kind of social experience that only clubmen had hitherto enjoyed—it was a kind of everyman’s club, and could counteract this anonymity. The rise of college athletics in the latter part of the nineteenth century offered teammates another form of social bonding, which the establishment of the Harvard Varsity Club in 1886 and the 1912 opening of its clubhouse, beside the Union, extended. These new institutions tended to break down barriers among students of different College classes, and of different social classes as well. “Let us all be under one roof,” Higginson famously declared.

Most students lived at home or in rooming houses, though the wealthy could rent apartments in the luxurious “Gold Coast” brick buildings along Mount Auburn Street (some now incorporated into Adams House). By the 1920s there were freshman dormitories, and seniors roomed in the Yard. That left a gap of two years when students lived wherever they could, and, as Samuel Eliot Morison wrote in Three Centuries of Harvard, “only the clubmen had decent dining choices after freshman year.” By 1926, a report from the Student Council recommended bringing together the three upper classes in residential units with common rooms and dining halls, but it was turned down, to the disappointment of President Abbott Lawrence Lowell. “He felt the College needed to exert a socializing influence,” Lewis says. “Lowell felt that ‘great masses of unorganized young men’ could get themselves into trouble. The houses could help students grow up by being in association with adults—teachers and scholars who would exert some kind of maturing influence on their minds and souls.”

In 1928, Edward Harkness, an 1897 graduate of Yale, walked into Lowell’s office and offered him $5 million to build an “Honor College,” for selected upperclassmen, with resident tutors and a master. Harkness had already offered a similar plan to Yale, but became discouraged by arguments and delays there. “It took Mr. Lowell about ten seconds to accept,” Morison reported, and Harvard’s governing boards moved ahead with such speed and enthusiasm that Harkness soon increased his offer to $10 million to create seven houses for the majority of upperclassmen—three to be built from “the ground up,” and the other four outfitted by modifying existing structures. (Harkness eventually also underwrote the college system at Yale.)

The radical plan aroused both ardor and opposition. The faculty felt Harvard should move more slowly, trying out the house idea with three houses first, to apply lessons learned to their successors. The clubmen resented being herded together with the majority, who in turn lamented the loss of Harvard’s traditional flexibility. The Crimson condemned the plan, and students were generally hostile. They dreaded boarding-school discipline such as the practice of “gating” students (essentially academic house arrest) that had been used at Oxford.

Nonetheless, the first two houses—Dunster, named after Harvard’s first president, and Lowell—opened for occupancy in the fall of 1930 and immediately filled their suites. The other five—Eliot, Winthrop, Kirkland, Leverett, and Adams—were all ready the next year.

Lowell didn’t follow the Oxford/Cambridge model completely. Their residential colleges are academic units with tutors acting as the linchpins of student work. The Harvard houses host tutorials and other academic events, but they are primarily social institutions. Lowell was also trying to break down the gulfs between rich and poor, and feared that if undergraduates chose their own housing, a class-bred segregation might establish itself. In fact, it took quite a while before the majority of students lived in the houses, and for a time there were different room rates charged for suites on various floors of Dunster. In the 1950s and 1960s, house masters would interview freshmen to select their incoming sophomores; under its longtime master John Finley, Eliot House, for example, gained a reputation as a haven for prep-school alumni.

In general, though, “this was designed to be a device to promote diversity and contact between diverse groups of students,” says Lewis. Yet the diversity of the 1930s didn’t extend to racial co-mingling: Lowell chose to exclude black students from the houses in what he claimed were their own best interests.
form communities of their own within and across Houses. “I view my athletic education as being just as important as my academic education,” says Chaudhuri, a varsity tennis player. “The athletic endeavor teaches you values and principles. That’s why you go to school: to learn from someone who’s older and wiser than you. I don’t think there’s any student at Harvard who would say they’d rather be home-schooled or do everything online.”

“to forget one’s purpose is the commonest form of stupidity,” said Nietzsche, and as a house master, Rakesh Khurana likes to keep this quote in mind. A master “is always on a greasy learning curve,” he says. “You never master being a master.” But he does have a clear vision of the educational purpose of the College: “We want to create a transformative experience for our students that enables them to become effective leaders and responsible citizens in society. If you keep that purpose in mind, it helps you make choices; you start thinking, ‘Wow, do we really need an underground parking structure, or would those resources have greater impact elsewhere?’”

Keeping the core purpose constantly in view is crucial because “small things can take the whole system out of alignment,” says Khurana. Take, for example, the 21-meal-per-week board plan to which all on-campus Harvard undergraduates must subscribe. It means that everyone in the College eats nearly every meal with fellow students, tutors, masters, and house affiliates—a fact that may be the single most important element sustaining the sense of community in the houses. In contrast, undergraduates at MIT, for example, can choose meal plans of 10, 12, 14, or 19 meals per week, opting to eat the rest off-campus. This results in a very different sort of college experience.

The fact that each house has its own residential dining hall is “very inefficient,” acknowledges Harry Lewis, Gordon McKay professor of computer science and former dean of Harvard College. “To have 12 different dining halls, each serving 350 to 500 students, is definitely not optimal—an efficiency expert would tell you to close half of them at least.” Khurana agrees that many of his business-school colleagues would be quick to advocate cost savings from a more centralized food service. “But it’s not about efficiency, it’s about effectiveness,” he says. “If you understand that, you won’t use minimizing cost as the measure of the value we are creating.”

It’s difficult to overstate the importance of the conversations and connections that take place in the dining halls. “You would come down to breakfast and there would be a few people drinking coffee, eating, and reading The New York Times,” recalls Alfie Alcorn ’64, of his Winthrop House experience. “They’d be thrashing out the morning’s news—with Stanley Hoffmann [now Buttenwieser University Professor emeritus] leavening the conversation.” Former Eliot House master Lino Pertile (now director of Harvard’s Villa I Tatti in Florence) felt so strongly about the power of lunchtime interaction, says Lewis, that he asserted that if he could make only one change at Harvard, it would be to hold no classes between noon and two o’clock. “The students would all go back to their houses for lunch,” says Lewis, “and the faculty could go to the houses and have lunch with them.”

Leverett House master Howard Georgi, Mallinckrodt professor of physics, believes that the College ought to do less to encourage extracurricular activities, which can act as a kind of centrifugal force pulling students away from their houses. “There’s a concern with the number of activities people are pursuing outside the classroom,” says Lassonde. “They [students] are all sleep-deprived, at all universities now. And they talk about sleep deprivation with pride—how little sleep they get, and how much they still have to do” (see “Nonstop,” March-April 2010, page 34). Harvard now has about 400 undergraduate organizations, and, as Georgi recommends, the College is considering reducing that number, perhaps by adding stipulations to the requirements for forming an undergraduate organization.

The renovations at Quincy House’s Stone Hall provide a glimpse of the kinds of twenty-first-century learning communities that the houses may become. The elimination of walk-through bedrooms offers increased privacy to students. Corridors now connect entryways (formerly vertical “silos”) horizontally, allowing students to visit friends more easily. They also establish accessibility and

Recent renovations in Old Quincy, now renamed Stone Hall: a three-bedroom residential suite with Harvard-supplied furnishings; a new community room with couches, flat-screen TV, a new kitchen, and a below-grade terrace outside the glass doors; a smart classroom fitted with Mondopads and document cameras.
Each Thursday afternoon, in the master’s residence at Lowell House, there is a tea, and “It is packed!” according to master Diana Eck, who has headed the house with co-master Dorothy Austin since 1998. “Tea is one ritual most beloved by students.” Typically 150 to 200 show up to drink tea and eat egg-salad sandwiches, cookies, and even baked Brie set out by work-study students. Masters and tutors are there, and Lowellians can invite friends from other houses as well. In warmer weather the crowd spills into the courtyard. “It’s also a kind of glue for the community,” says Eck. “The weekly teas are something we invest in.”

“There is no community without ritual,” Eck explains. “Ritual creates a sense of we. Here, we do have the advantage of these beautiful courtyards. We do have a significant history that we recount to students: we wrote a booklet about all the portraits that hang in the house. Students have a sense that their place matters.”

Throughout the year there are ritual events. Trivia Nights occur once per semester, with members of the Senior Common Room (SCR) squaring off against students. Before the Christmas break, Lowell has a Yule Dinner (“We play to the pagan substructure of everything,” Eck says) at which House Committee members carry in the decorated Yule log and toss it onto the hearth. Singer-songwriter Livingston Taylor, a Lowell SCR member who formerly lived in the house for years as a resident artist, wrote an anthem, “Forever Lowell,” that sometimes plays a part in house events.

The best-known of Lowell’s traditions is its High Table, a black-tie dinner held eight times a year for seniors, who are invited, one entryway at a time, to dine with members of the SCR on an elevated platform at one end of the house dining hall. “It feels as if you’re in a special world,” says Eck; the meal is served family-style, with wine and candlesticks, as the rest of the dining hall goes through the servery line and looks admiringly on.

Rakesh Khurana continues the thought: “In the early twentieth century, the differences may have accentuated class or ethnicity; today, the differences are in values, cultural assumptions, background, identity. That’s the kind of world our students will need not only to navigate, but to find strength in.”

These residential learning communities are places where tutors and masters learn as well. Richard Wrangham, for example, came to Harvard from the University of Michigan in 1989, and taught anthropology for nearly two decades before becoming a master. “I thought I knew the students well,” he says. “I teach small classes, and have lots of one-on-one conversations. Our department has a strong tradition of interacting with students. But it was a shock to see how little I knew, having only seen people through their academic lives. In Currier House, we see them as whole people. It’s hard to appreciate, for example, just how much they are doing—sports, producing shows, working on the Crimson—and how little time they often have for academics. You are seeing students like family, and getting to know them in all their multidimensional dimensions.”

The Wranghams and their fellow masters—who meet once a month to compare notes—apparently are succeeding in that endeavor, which is one reason Harvard is investing in the future of its houses. “People spend a lot of time at the Crimson or a club or the theater, but the house becomes their home base,” says Diana Eck. “We’ve been doing this for more than 10 years and have seen reunion classes come back, so we’ve heard it first-hand: this was the place that mattered the most to them. This is the place where the tree of learning and the tree of life grow together.”

Craig A. Lambert ’69, Ph.D. ’78, is deputy editor of this magazine.