

Lowell Speech

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Remember arriving at college? We bid tearful farewells to our parents, we awkwardly introduce ourselves to new roommates, and then we're left to confront the dorm room. It's rectangular. It's sort of off-white. It's got your standard dormitory furniture. And it is absolutely empty.

Spaces and places are important to me. I get nostalgic about places quickly, and those associations last. Even places I've lived during summers take on a retrospective significance for me.

This winter, I read a book called “H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness” by the Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich. He argues that industrial society has transformed our relationships with the spaces in which we live. He's a pretty nostalgic guy, himself: before the industrial revolution, he thinks, people lived in authentic relationships with their homes. They left traces of themselves on their homes, and they lived among those traces. Illich thinks there's something important about living among the traces of one's own living; he calls it “dwelling.” Dwelling becomes impossible in industrial society because people are instead stored in anonymous, mass-produced, numbered units.

I think dorm rooms work a little like Illich's vision of industrial space. The experience of living in a dorm room can be alienating. The space is only yours for a very short time. The room has always just been someone else's space, and it's always just about to be someone else's space again. And even when you're living in it, a dorm room is never really yours. Once, I lent a friend my key so that he could go back to my room to pick up his own wallet, which he had forgotten there. Our ever-vigilant building manager Bob somehow caught the guy, confiscated the key, and threatened to add board me. A friend in another house received an email at noon telling her that her new roommate would be moving in by four o'clock that same day. And here in Lowell, Aftab and Dhruv were unusual when they lived in the same room two years in a row. Our relationships with our dorm rooms are so temporary and unstable.

So what do we do? We're deprived of connection with spaces and places. I think we can react in two ways. First, we can push ahead anyway – to forge connections with our spaces. We put things on our walls, sometimes not for their content, but just for the act of covering, of claiming. I've seen people turn their furniture upside down, and build ball pits in their common rooms. We are pushed to rethink our uses of the space we are assigned.

And we do end up relying on our dorm rooms for all sorts of

things. We throw parties, we hang out – I even once got a haircut in a dorm room. But all these activities are about livening up the space by inviting other people in. We dwell not in the rooms, exactly, but with the people we invite inside.

Alienation from space turns our thirst for connection elsewhere – toward people, I think. We invest in people because we cannot invest in more conventional notions of home. Illich ends up talking about people’s “auras” and it feels a little mystical, but I think he’s got a point: we project ourselves out when we forge connections with people, when we find home in the people around us – when we dwell with them. There are a lot of other factors that also pull or push us together – but I wonder if our dorm rooms don’t have something to do with it.

One experience sticks out. The day we got back to school my junior fall, my roommates and I hosted a blank party. We kept our suitcases packed, we drank only white wine out of clear plastic cups, and everyone wore off-white or grey. Our dorm room that night was perhaps at its most bleak, its most alien – but the space was full of warmth and light, and people.

The residential experience at Harvard is supposed to be a force for connection – to bring people together – but I think it also pushes people together by alienating us from physical spaces, so we turn to non-spatial

connections and find home in other realms. In the tunnels under Eliot House, someone wrote, “My home is not a place, it is people.” There’s something comforting in that. Maybe we can’t dwell in our dorm rooms, but we can dwell with our friends. And unlike the physical spaces of Lowell House, I don’t have to leave all you people behind after Bob kicks us out for the last time.