

# Rethinking Student Hostels for Mental Health and Holistic Living

Batul Zehra<sup>1</sup>, Ar. Samreen S. Siddiqui<sup>2</sup>, Ar. Pooja Singh<sup>2</sup>, Deepti P. Rana<sup>2\*</sup>

## Abstract

*The escalating issue of mental illness among students has emerged as a serious issue in learning spaces globally, with India being no exception. The hostel, in most cases, is viewed only as a shelter, but it assumes much more significant functions in shaping the psychological and emotional lives of students. With intensifying academic and social demands, the physical environment of these hostels is inadequately equipped to cater to the comprehensive needs of the students, causing alienation, stress, and burnout. The present research identifies ways in which the building design and operation of student hostels can be transformed to promote mental well-being and integrated living. The research employs a mixed-method approach using surveys, interviews, spatial mapping, and case studies of Indian and international hostels. It examines how specific design factors – like natural daylight, shared spaces, vegetation, and adaptability – can contribute to the positive mental well-being of students. The research proposes a set of design guidelines that integrate wellness, community, and comfort into hostel planning. The goal is to encourage a shift in perception: from hostels as functional dormitories to supportive environments that nurture emotional resilience and social connection.*

**Keywords:** Built environment, environmental psychology, biophilic design, spatial planning, spatial hierarchy

## INTRODUCTION

Indian student hostels in the past have been conceived with functionality and availability as the major concern, and not the psychological and emotional comfort of the occupants. Most hostels, especially in government institutions, use a uniform design with extensive corridors, identical rooms, and spartan furniture. Although this method maximally packs large numbers of students, it tends to neglect the quality of life. Overcrowding, poor ventilation, limited daylight, and scarce recreational areas are typical problems, generating spaces that are institutional and uninviting more than they are supportive [1].

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The built environment significantly influences mental health. For students, hostels are not only where they sleep, they are the settings in which they study, socialize, relax, and form personal identities. Evidence in environmental psychology indicates that the level of natural light access, air quality, spatial organization, and social spaces significantly impacts mood, attention, and tension levels. Poor living conditions in hostels thus tend to enhance feelings of loneliness, worry, and tiredness, whereas well-planned spaces can bring about comfort, productivity, and emotional strength [2].

These elements are crucial, yet there are shortcomings in hostel design. Most of the facilities

do not have adequate ventilation and daylight, which can affect both physical well-being and psychological health. Social and recreational areas are usually nonexistent or inadequately integrated, with limited spaces for social interaction with peers [3]. Privacy is extremely low, with several students occupying a small room, with this potentially causing discomfort and stress. These design flaws identify an essential requirement for reimagining student hostels not only as utilitarian spaces, but as spaces that positively nurture holistic living and mental wellbeing.

## RESEARCH AIM

To develop design strategies and guidelines that integrate mental wellness and holistic living principles into the planning and design of student hostels.

## Objectives

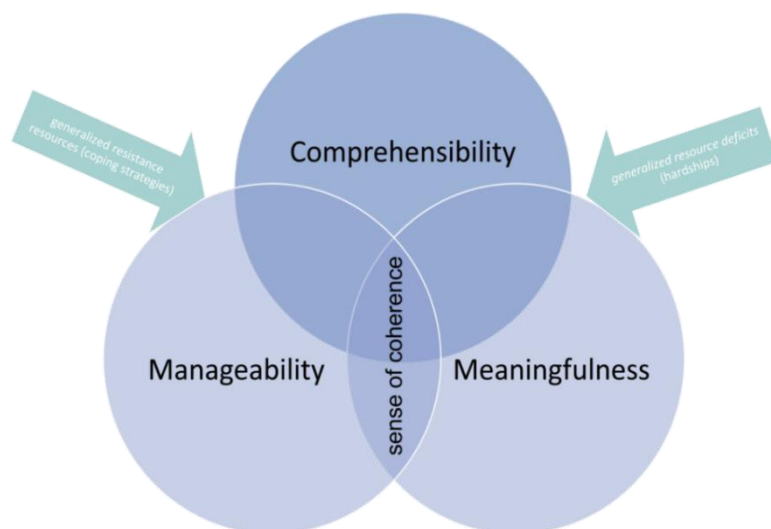
- To understand the most significant mental wellbeing challenges experienced by students residing in hostels.
- To investigate the spatial and social constraints of current hostel designs.
- To review international case studies of student accommodation focused on wellness.
- To suggest design solutions that increase comfort, social interaction, and emotional well-being.

Hostels are not buildings, they are short-term homes where young adults develop habits, friendships, and coping strategies. Reframing these spaces with empathy, inclusiveness, and psychological thoughtfulness can turn them into settings that cultivate both personal and academic development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Relationship Between Environment and Behavior

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) [3] offers a starting point in understanding this relationship. As Maslow explains, after the basic needs for shelter and safety are fulfilled, people pursue belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Hostels can respond to these higher-order needs if designed with sensitivity to emotional and social aspects.



**Figure 1.** Salutogenic design.

Salutogenic Design (Figure 1), developed by Aaron Antonovsky, underlines the same by emphasizing environments that contribute positively to health instead of simply avoiding damage. Salutogenic Design stresses the “Sense of Coherence,” which consists of comprehensibility (environmental clarity), manageability (control over the environment), and meaningfulness (emotional response to the environment). Biophilic Design introduces an additional element, emphasizing the inborn human requirement to connect with nature. Incorporating features, like daylight, plants, water,

and natural material into the living environment has been proven to decrease stress, enhance concentration, and increase happiness. Collectively, these strategies provide a sound theoretical basis for designing student accommodation to promote mental and emotional well-being [4].

### **Global Best Practices in Student Housing Design**

Globally, student accommodation is being developed with more wellness-driven design principles incorporated into its construction by universities and builders alike. MIT's Simmons Hall in the USA combines bright hues, adaptable layouts, and several open courtyards to nurture creativity and interaction. Scandinavian student housing, prevalent in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, focuses on daylight, communal kitchens, and shared lounges designed to promote social bonding, combined with good access to greenery and external areas (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Cowan court.

Japan's co-living model offers compact, individual rooms with carefully crafted shared spaces that balance people with their private time, merging community with individual life. European universities, like institutions in Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK, incorporate wellness features, such as rooftop gardens, gyms, creative workspaces, and meditation rooms into their housing, showcasing the ways housing can be integrated into overall student well-being [5].

By contrast, most Indian hostels still stick to old-fashioned, stiff designs – long corridors, uniform rooms, sparse outdoor space – more concerned with efficiency and control than with individuality, comfort, and emotional life. Although some contemporary private hostels have started adding lounges, green spaces, and activity areas, these innovations have yet to catch on in the institutionalized sector. This lacuna emphasizes the importance of developing global best practices to suit the cultural, climatic, and economic conditions prevailing in India, which is an important area of study for this work [6].

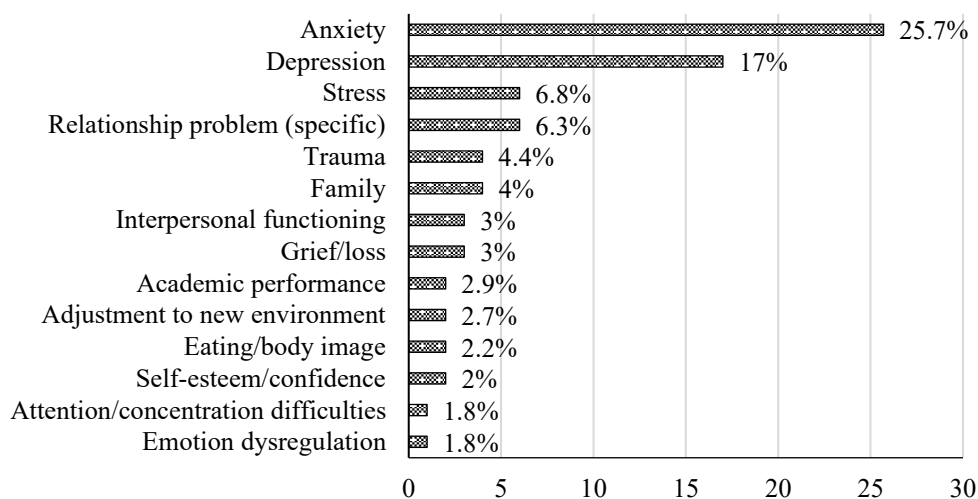
### **MENTAL HEALTH IN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS**

Student mental health issues have gained prominence globally. Learning can be both enriching and distressing, and living conditions make a vital contribution to it (Figure 3).

Research in the UK, Australia, and elsewhere has indicated that hostels with natural light, fresh air, quiet study areas, and recreational areas improve mental well-being, academic performance, and general

satisfaction. In contrast, overcrowding, noise pollution, inadequate ventilation, and lack of privacy strengthen stress, anxiety, and loneliness. In India, where standardized, utilitarian hostel designs are the norm, these issues tend to be exacerbated. These studies collectively highlight the importance of treating hostel environments not just as accommodation but as spaces that actively influence mental health and holistic living.

Top Concerns of College Students According to Mental Health Clinicians



**Figure 3.** Mental health concerns.

### Role of Community, Nature, and Space Personalization in Student Well-Being

Research emphasizes that three factors, community, access to nature, and personalization of space, play a critical role in student well-being. The Sense of Community Theory postulates that shared areas and constructive social contact enhance emotional safety and counter loneliness. Hostels with shared lounges, co-living kitchens, hobby corners, and activity spaces promote interaction and facilitate a sense of belonging. Nature inclusions through courtyards, green roofs, houseplants, and sunlight have proven to enhance mood, counteract stress, and foster mental clarity. For pressure-ridden students, such restorative spaces provide a psychological sanctuary [7].

Space personalization is just as important. Providing students with the freedom to organize, decorate, and modify their living spaces creates a sense of ownership, comfort, and psychological bonding. Personalization turns impersonal rooms into spaces of identity and expression, turning hostels into not only a place where one stays, but a space that reflects the student's personality.

Together, these findings emphasize that hostel design must transcend functional requirements. A holistic approach – integrating environmental psychology, global best practices, mental health research, and a focus on community and nature – can transform student hostels into supportive spaces that nurture mental health, creativity, and personal growth [8].

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of how hostel environments influence student mental health and well-being. The mixed-method approach allows for both the collection of measurable data and the exploration of lived experiences, enabling a holistic understanding of hostel design challenges and opportunities.

### Research Questions

This study aims to address the following research questions.

- What are the key design issues in existing student hostels that affect mental health and well-being?
- How do students perceive and experience their hostel environment in relation to privacy, social interaction, and comfort?
- Which global and local hostel design strategies effectively support mental health and holistic living?
- How can best practices from case studies be adapted to the Indian context to improve hostel design?

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through three complementary methods.

#### ***Surveys and Interviews***

Surveys were distributed among hostel residents to capture quantitative data on their satisfaction with living conditions, perceptions of comfort, and the impact of their environment on mental health. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with hostel residents, wardens, and counselors to explore qualitative insights about hostel life, privacy concerns, social interaction, and perceived design shortcomings [9].

#### ***Observational Studies***

Observational studies were conducted in selected hostels to document spatial usage patterns, daylight penetration, ventilation quality, and patterns of social interaction. Spatial mapping techniques were used to record how residents use different areas within the hostel. Daylight analysis was carried out using architectural drawings and on-site measurements to assess the influence of natural light on user comfort and mood.

#### ***Case Studies***

Case studies of innovative student hostels in India and abroad were carried out to identify best practices in wellness-oriented hostel design. The case studies include.

- *Interlude Girls Hostel, Lucknow, India*: Focused on gender-specific needs such as safety, privacy, and quiet zones for study (Figure 4).
- *Amity University Hostel, Lucknow, India*: Site visits, interviews, and spatial analysis were conducted to evaluate privacy, comfort, ventilation, daylighting, and availability of communal spaces (Figure 5).
- *Student Hostel, IIT Campus, Hyderabad, India*: Analyzed the integration of wellness features and planned layouts in an institutional setting (Figure 6).
- *Cowan Court, University of Cambridge, UK (Literature Study)*: Reviewed through academic literature and architectural documentation to understand international wellness-oriented hostel design principles (Figure 7).

These case studies were selected for their diversity in context, design approach, and cultural relevance, enabling a comparative analysis to inform recommendations for Indian hostels [10].

### **Tools**

The following tools were used for data collection and analysis:

- *Questionnaires*: To collect quantitative data on resident satisfaction, comfort levels, and perceived impact of hostel environment on mental health.
- *Behavior Mapping*: To visually document patterns of use and social interaction within hostel spaces.
- *Spatial Analysis*: To assess ventilation, daylight access, layout efficiency, and spatial hierarchy.
- *Thematic Coding*: To analyze interview responses and identify recurring themes such as privacy concerns, communal interaction, and wellness needs.



**Figure 4.** Interlude girls' hostel, Lucknow.



**Figure 5.** Amity University hostel, Lucknow.



**Figure 6.** IIT Campus, Hyderabad.



**Figure 7.** Cowan Court University of Cambridge.

### **KEY ISSUES IN EXISTING HOSTELS**

Findings from observations, surveys, and case studies reveal several challenges in current hostel environments that directly affect student mental well-being and living experience.

#### **Overcrowding and Lack of Privacy**

Many hostels are designed to maximize occupancy, resulting in cramped rooms and limited personal space (Figure 8).



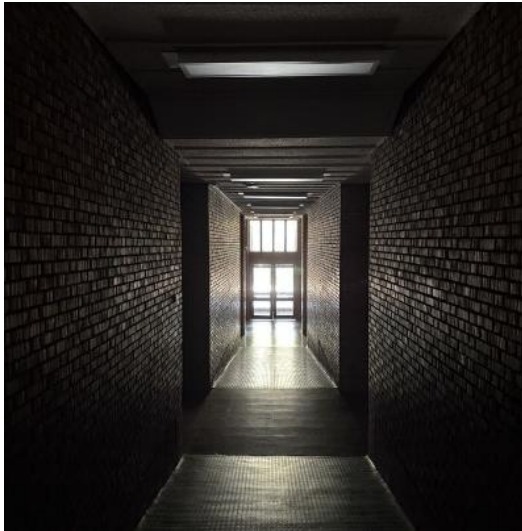
**Figure 8.** Overcrowding and lack of privacy.

Continuous noise from corridors and common areas, shared washrooms, and lack of individual storage create an environment where students struggle to relax or focus. This constant exposure to others without a private retreat increases stress, irritability, and mental fatigue [11].

#### **Inadequate Natural Light and Ventilation**

Poor ventilation and insufficient daylight are widespread issues. Dimly lit, enclosed spaces lead to discomfort, lower productivity, and affect mood regulation (Figure 9).

Observations show that natural light and airflow not only improve physical comfort but also positively influence emotional well-being. Yet, many hostels lack sufficient design consideration for daylight penetration or natural ventilation.



**Figure 9.** Inadequate natural light and ventilation.

### **Absence of Wellness and Recreational Spaces**

Few hostels offer dedicated spaces for relaxation, creative activities, or physical exercise. Without such facilities, students tend to retreat to their rooms for leisure, increasing isolation, and reducing healthy social engagement. The absence of recreational spaces limits opportunities for stress relief and holistic wellness [12].

### **Poor Design for Social Interaction**

Hostel layouts with long corridors and isolated clusters of rooms often discourage spontaneous interaction among residents (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Poor design for social interaction.

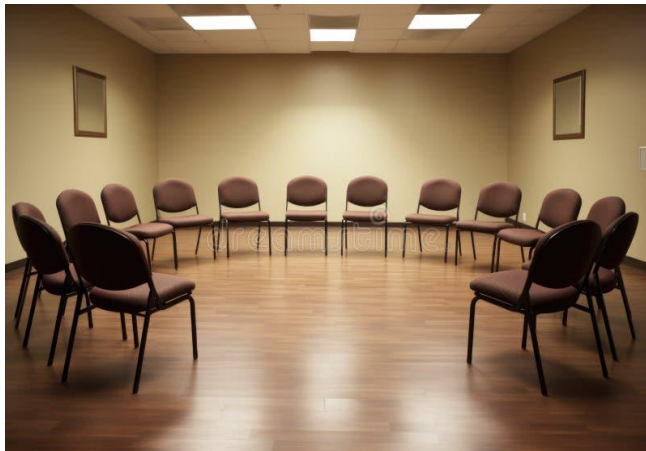
Where communal spaces exist, they are often poorly located or furnished, leading to underutilization. This lack of well-designed social areas reduces opportunities for building community and belonging.

### **Monotony and Institutional Ambience**

Uniform layouts, bland colors, and repetitive designs create environments that feel impersonal and sterile. Lack of aesthetic variety or personalization can lead to emotional detachment and lower motivation, making hostel life feel more like an institutional obligation than a supportive living experience.

### **Lack of Emotional and Psychological Support Infrastructure**

Few hostels incorporate spaces for counseling, meditation, or wellness activities (Figure 11).



**Figure 11.** Lack of counseling spaces.

Students facing emotional distress often lack accessible, private areas to seek help, which can affect their overall mental health. Incorporating wellness-focused spaces could help create more supportive hostel environments [13].

### **PROPOSED DESIGN STRATEGIES**

Based on environmental psychology theories, global case studies, observations, and student feedback, the following strategies are proposed to transform student hostels into supportive, wellness-oriented environments. These address the issues identified in existing hostels and aim to enhance comfort, mental well-being, safety, and community.

#### **Spatial Well-Being**

Balancing private and communal zones allows students to rest, focus, and socialize as needed.

- *Private Zones:* Semi-personal study corners, rooms with partitions, or pods offer privacy without complete isolation. This allows students to focus and recharge mentally.
- *Communal Zones:* Lounges, discussion areas, and shared kitchens encourage informal interaction, peer learning, and cultural exchange.
- *Quiet Corners:* Low-noise zones away from main corridors for reading, reflection, or rest foster concentration and emotional balance.

#### **Biophilic Integration**

Integrating natural elements enhances emotional comfort and reduces stress.

- *Green Spaces:* Courtyards, rooftop terraces, indoor gardens, and vertical greenery provide calming visual breaks and improve air quality (Figure 12).
- *Daylight and Ventilation:* Large operable windows, skylights, and open layouts ensure daylight penetration and natural ventilation, benefiting both physical and mental health.

#### **Wellness-Oriented Features**

Wellness spaces promote physical and emotional balance.

- *Mindfulness Areas:* Meditation and yoga rooms equipped with calming décor, soft flooring, and natural light encourage relaxation (Figure 13).
- *Creative Zones:* Hobby studios, music corners, art spaces, and small libraries support stress relief and self-expression.
- *Fitness Facilities:* Compact gyms, yoga decks, and outdoor activity zones encourage physical health and foster community interaction.



**Figure 12.** Vertical greenery.



**Figure 13.** Meditation rooms.

### Community-Building Spaces

Spaces designed for interaction strengthen belonging and emotional resilience.

- *Interactive Lounges:* Flexible lounges with seating, games, and discussion areas encourage spontaneous connection (Figure 14).
- *Shared Kitchens/Cafés:* Spaces for collaborative cooking and casual gatherings foster cultural exchange and peer bonding.
- *Activity Courtyards:* Outdoor areas for group activities, events, and celebrations encourage collective engagement [14].

### Comfort and Safety

Comfort and safety are essential for mental wellness:

- *Furniture and Lighting:* Ergonomic furniture, adequate task lighting, and soundproofed study areas improve comfort and productivity.
- *Safety Features:* Controlled entry systems, gender-sensitive layouts, well-lit corridors, and clear sightlines ensure security and peace of mind.



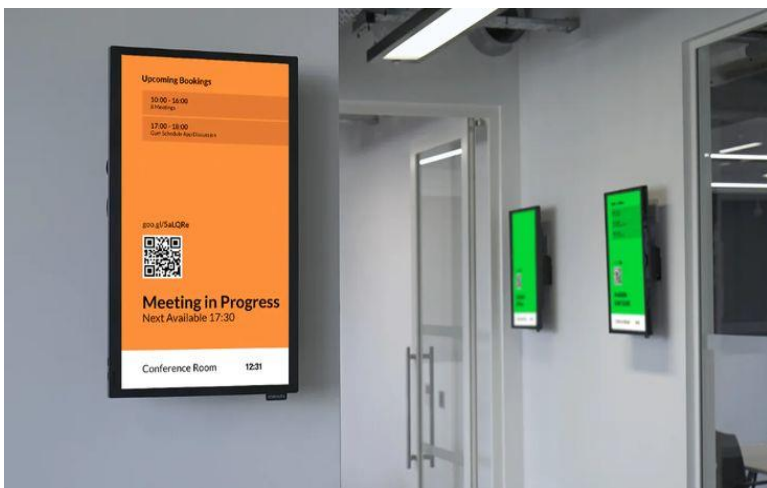
**Figure 14.** Flexible lounges.

### Technology for Safety, Wellness, and Convenience

Smart technology can enhance hostel living by improving safety, well-being, and convenience.

- *Safety & Wellness Technology:* RFID or biometric room access, bed-embedded sleep sensors, air quality monitors, and discreet emergency buttons enhance safety and monitor health. Suicide prevention measures, such as anti-jump balcony railings and tamper-proof windows, ensure wellbeing (Figure 15).
- *Convenience Technology:* Central hostel apps for service requests, automated laundry systems, smart lockers for parcel and food deliveries, and app-controlled lighting increase convenience and efficiency (Figure 16).
- *Social & Learning Support Technology:* Digital notice boards keep students informed, AR/VR learning pods foster collaboration, and soundproof study booths provide focused spaces for group and individual work.

These strategies should be integrated into hostel design holistically. Spatial planning, biophilic elements, wellness spaces, community areas, safety measures, and technology must work together to create a living environment that supports physical comfort, emotional resilience, and social belonging [15].



**Figure 15.** Digital noticeboard and biometric access.



**Figure 16.** Bed embedded smart features.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of the research strongly reiterate that the built environment strongly influences human feelings, behavior, and well-being. In all cases, students residing in hostels with more favorable provision for natural light, ventilation, adaptive spaces, and shared spaces had higher satisfaction and lower stress levels. On the other hand, conventional hostel environments characterized by inflexible layouts, density, inadequate ventilation, and absence of wellness spaces were associated with feelings of loneliness, mental exhaustion, and low motivation.

The statistics emphasize that hostel life is not just about offering shelter – it is an experience that shapes academic achievement, emotional well-being, and social development. A welcoming hostel environment should weigh privacy, social life, safety, and health, while incorporating technology and nature.

**Comparative Insights**

A comparison between traditional hostel models and wellness-integrated hostels clearly highlights the benefits of a holistic design approach.

**Table 1.** User-Centric & Wellbeing Emphasis.

Aspect	Traditional Hostels	Wellness-Oriented Hostels
Layout	Linear corridors, uniform rooms, minimal zoning	Flexible zones with private, communal, and quiet areas; open layouts encourage interaction.
Lighting & Ventilation	Reliance on artificial lighting, limited windows, poor airflow	Ample natural light, cross ventilation, operable windows, skylights.
Social Interaction	Limited, often formal and infrequent	Encouraged through lounges, shared kitchens, activity courtyards.
Recreation	Minimal or absent	Integrated recreation zones, hobby studios, fitness and wellness spaces.
Mental Health Support	Neglected	meditation areas, wellness hubs.
Safety & Comfort	Basic safety measures, minimal ergonomic considerations	Advanced safety features, gender-sensitive layouts, ergonomic furniture, soundproofing.
Technology	Minimal, utility-based	Smart systems for safety, convenience, wellness monitoring, and learning support.

This comparison reveals that wellness-oriented hostels offer a richer, more humane experience, moving beyond functional accommodation to environments that actively support students’ holistic development.

### Student Feedback

Survey and interview results reinforce these findings

- *Personal Space*: Over 80% of respondents expressed a need for more personal space, with many highlighting overcrowding and lack of privacy as major stress factors.
- *Access to Nature*: Approximately 75% agreed that green spaces, daylight, and fresh air contribute significantly to their emotional well-being.
- *Social Spaces*: Over 70% expressed a desire for more community-based facilities, such as lounges, shared kitchens, and hobby areas, to facilitate interaction and cultural exchange.
- *Mental Wellness Support*: Many students noted the absence of spaces for meditation, or stress relief, and expressed strong interest in wellness hubs within hostels.
- *Technology Needs*: Students appreciated the idea of integrated technology such as hostel apps for service requests, automated systems, smart lockers, and wellness monitoring.

Interviews with wardens and hostel managers corroborated these student sentiments, highlighting that traditional hostel designs focus primarily on capacity and functionality rather than well-being. This gap confirms the urgency of adopting a wellness-integrated approach to hostel design.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research concludes that hostel architecture is not simply a matter of housing but has the capacity to significantly influence students' mental, emotional, and social health. A conducive physical environment can minimize stress, create a sense of belonging, promote quality social interactions, and thereby improve academic achievement. Through the incorporation of wellness principles in hostel planning, institutions can turn living spaces into environments that foster personal development, emotional equanimity, and holistic existence.

This study illustrates that hostel planning must move beyond capacity and efficiency thinking – it must be founded upon empathy, inclusivity, and responsiveness to the varied needs of students.

### Key Findings

From field studies, surveys, case analyses, and theoretical frameworks, several key findings emerge.

- *Environmental Influence*: Built environments have a direct impact on students' mental well-being, affecting mood, stress levels, and productivity.
- *Design Gaps*: Existing hostel typologies in India largely neglect psychological comfort, focusing instead on capacity, security, and basic functionality.
- *Critical Wellness Factors*: Natural light, ventilation, greenery, privacy, and social spaces are essential for holistic living and emotional resilience.
- *Benefits of Wellness Design*: Incorporating wellness principles – such as biophilic integration, flexible spatial zoning, wellness hubs, and technology – can improve student satisfaction, foster a sense of community, and reduce stress.

### Recommendations

To foster wellness-oriented hostel environments, the following recommendations are proposed.

- *Mental Health-Oriented Design Briefs*: Universities should incorporate mental health and wellness criteria into hostel design briefs and evaluation frameworks.
- *Adopt Holistic Design Principles*: Architects and planners should integrate biophilic and salutogenic principles to create spaces that actively promote well-being.
- *Policy Support*: Policy frameworks must mandate minimum wellness standards for campus housing, ensuring accessibility, safety, and environmental quality.
- *Student Participation*: Engage students in the design process to encourage personalization, ownership, and a sense of belonging.
- *Balanced Design Approach*: Future hostels should combine privacy with community spaces, adaptability, and flexibility to accommodate evolving student lifestyles and preferences.

### Future Scope

The proposed wellness-oriented hostel design model has potential applicability beyond student housing. Similar principles can be extended too.

- Staff housing within institutional campuses.
- Co-living spaces for working professionals.
- Corporate dormitories and residential training facilities.

Future research could explore measurable psychological outcomes of such wellness-oriented spaces through post-occupancy evaluations and longitudinal studies. This would allow designers to refine approaches and quantify the benefits of integrating wellness principles into institutional housing.

By rethinking hostel design as a catalyst for emotional and social well-being, universities can create environments that not only accommodate students but also support their holistic development – helping them thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

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