

In Praise of Squalor – at Least in College Housing

The wine stain on the carpet looks like Turkey, a little Anatolian plateau in vintage purple—or maybe it's the head of a chubby [theropod](#). It matches the picture of Atatürk hanging on the wall in its shabby frame, forever winked at by Lana Del Rey from a ragged-edged poster covered in the signatures of distinguished houseguests (The [father of his country](#) clearly enjoys this but cannot admit as much right now because that preachy current president, Erdogan, is trying to supplant him in the hearts of his people). The couches do not match, neither each other nor the rest of the room, but they are all uniformly dirty. Empty bottles and full books fill the gaps in the decor.

My happiest college memories are set amid such squalor.

Crain's Chicago Business [reports](#) that the luxury student housing industry is profitable and growing, which signals yet more misplaced priorities in the American university system. Diogenes would not be Diogenes [without his barrel](#) and college can not be what it is supposed to be when housing becomes a status symbol and the state of your living quarters can be anything more than adequate—or, if the decor is in particularly good taste, of spirited wit and good sense, “tolerable.” If your dorm room or off-campus house is already a wreck, you can live with abandon. If it resembles a luxury high-rise, what will you do once you graduate and realize what an affordable first apartment really looks like?

We might live in a world taken over by Marie Kondo-style [minimalism](#), but campus life requires the cultivation of a certain kind of dualism, one where the life of the mind can flourish regardless of one's surroundings. You need a place that is home to your own mixture of cynical immaturity and

earnest new adulthood; it needn't be truly dirty or dangerous, but it cannot be like the first apartment of your professional life. Let living arrangements encourage passing whiskey cheap enough to fuel a motorbike while reciting Hopkins to one another, a place for smoking cigarettes inside while having felicitous intercourse over the implications of the Protestant Reformation, a place—perhaps a little brighter, a little cleaner—for tea with many laughing friends. The surroundings are simply the setting, insignificant enough to be taken for granted as the real business of college, friendship and learning, is pursued.

Luxury living is just another reminder that secondary education has been turned into a consumer package. Buy this four-year program and you'll get a personal sauna, chic apartment, and someday-maybe-if-you-are-very-lucky even a job. We like to think a college education prepares us for the "real world," that it makes us cosmopolitan; but we have forgotten what the word really means. Diogenes dubbed himself the first cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world, but that meant rejecting all the symbolism and traditions and decadence of the societies in whose midst he lived—forswearing luxury, not embracing it. Today we go to school to be given a certificate of meritocracy, to become uniform in our diversity. There's nothing cosmopolitan about becoming just one more perfectly boring cog in the bureaucratic regime.

But a life lived among members of a community unconcerned by the status of amenities and undisturbed by the need to ape contemporary sophistication frees up the mind to pursue a life of learning. It might not be glamorous; it is not always clean; but amid the wine-stained carpet and second-hand furniture piled high with school books and papers and pizza boxes, students can make lasting college memories—and focus on what matters.

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