

# Building a community of learning at Yale-NUS

Residential college model fosters peer effect of mutual learning and growth

By PERICLES LEWIS

ONE of the aspects of American higher education that attracts so many top foreign students is the residential college model, which goes back to the first American institutions of higher learning such as Harvard and Yale and before them to Oxford and Cambridge.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) has recently been embracing the residential college model at University Town, introducing a residential component to its University Scholars Programme at Cinnamon College, and establishing Tembusu and Angsana colleges, and now Yale-NUS College.

Ground was broken this week for the new residential colleges for Yale-NUS. This model gives Singapore the opportunity to further enhance its status as an educational hub by adding to the educational landscape a form of education that is currently rare in Asia. Such a model emphasises how the residential liberal arts college can shape a "community of learning".

The first residential colleges were constructed at Oxford in the 13th century for students at the university there.

The father of English poetry, Geoffrey Chaucer, paints a famous picture of a student at Oxford around that time, who wears a threadbare cloak, rides an emaciated horse and is rather underfed himself. So dedicated is the student to philosophy that when he gets some money from his friends, he spends it not on fine clothes, or a new horse, or even food for himself, but on books about Aristotle. Chaucer concludes this memorable portrait of the Oxford student by saying "gladly would he learn and gladly teach".

It is important for students to be reasonably well-clothed and well-fed, but the essential character of college life is not just the attention the college pays to the needs of the body but also the sense of a group of friends and classmates who learn together and who teach one another.

This is what social scientists call the "peer effect", and it is something professors sometimes neglect to acknowledge, namely

that students can – in the right environment – learn as much from their interactions with one another in student societies and team sports, and from late-night conversations over tea and a snack, as they do from their formal course work.

The model of a community of learning, in which living and learning are intertwined, informs the traditions and values of both Yale and NUS.

Yale College opened in 1701 with just seven students, and for most of its history, most students lived on campus. Likewise, one of the original institutions that would eventually make up NUS was Raffles College, which began in 1928 with just 43 students who lived in nearby hostels.

Around the time that Raffles College was founded, due to the great generosity of one of Yale's most memorable benefactors Edward Harkness, Yale, which had grown substantially, was able to construct the first eight of its beautiful residential colleges. The new colleges made possible a concept that we have come to call "nested communities".

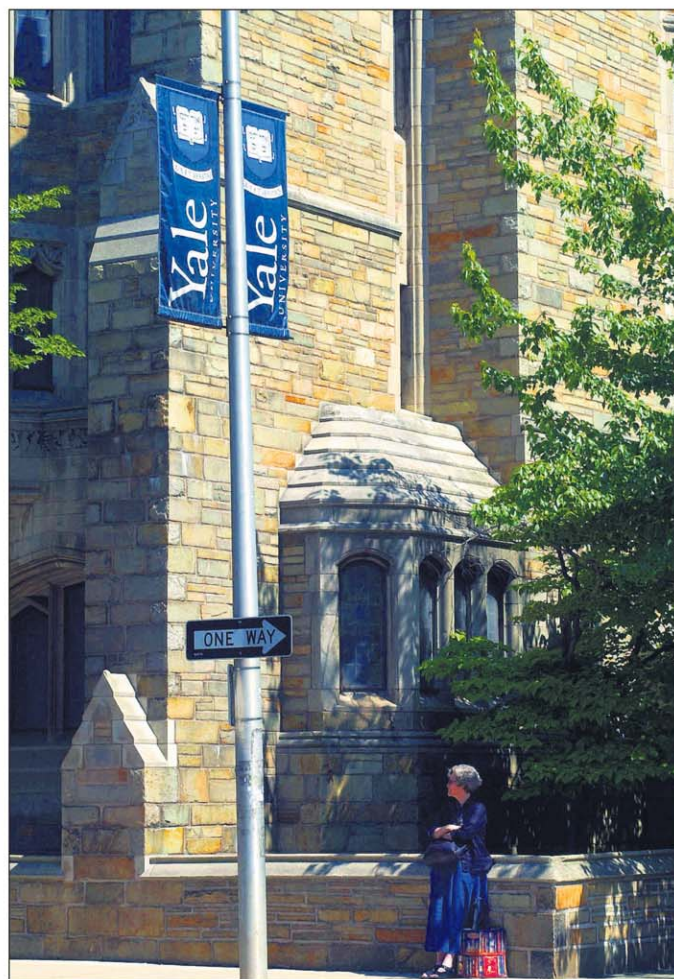
Within the larger group of over 5,000 Yale undergraduates, students today belong to a number of smaller communities, notably the group of 400 students in their own college, the smaller group of around 40 in their own neighbourhood within the college, and the even more intimate group of four to eight suitmates. These nested communities give Yale students strong bonds to their peer groups.

Yale replicated the architecture of Oxford and Cambridge, but it also made two distinctive contributions to the idea of a residential college. The first was that Yale had been, since the 19th century, a leader in the United States in the development of extra-curricular activities, or what we today call the "co-curriculum", namely the sports, clubs, societies, musical groups and student publications that create a lively civil society in parallel with the official curriculum taught by the professors.

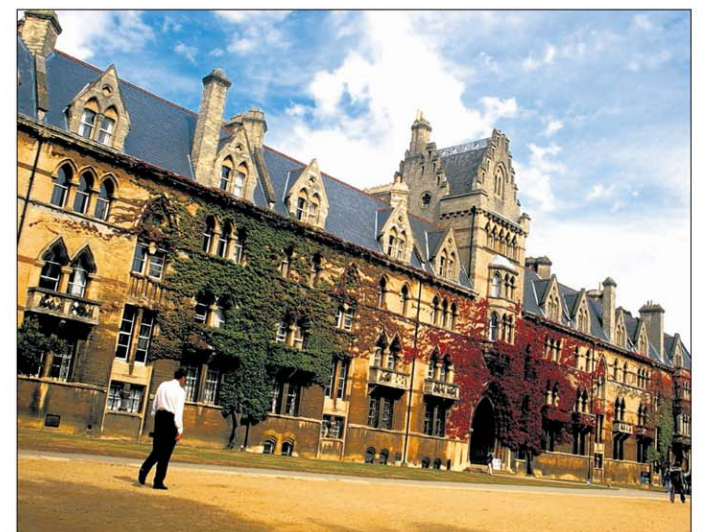
Second, after some experiments with letting students choose their own college, Yale recognised the value of deliberately making each residential college a microcosm of Yale College itself, containing a diversity of talents



An artist's impression of Yale-NUS College, the first liberal arts college in Singapore, which takes in its first batch of students next year. The design of the college seeks to find an architecture which balances Eastern and Western contexts and traditions. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE



Yale University's campus in New Haven, Connecticut. Its 5,000 undergraduates belong to smaller communities within their own colleges. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG



Christ Church College in Oxford, where the first residential colleges were constructed in the 13th century for university students. PHOTO: VISIT BRITAIN

and backgrounds. Studies have found that having a roommate from a different background or a different country significantly improves the learning experience of a typical undergraduate.

Friendships formed with peo-

ple unlike oneself blossom later in life into a broad-mindedness, a cosmopolitan outlook, that can be inculcated more successfully through informal contacts than through formal lectures on tolerance. (In this context, lively de-

bate is part of everyday life. This is just one of the ways that the Yale-NUS partnership can encourage openness and understanding.)

The design of Yale-NUS College seeks to find an architecture which balances Eastern and Western contexts and traditions, but it has, in truth, created something new, something greater than the sum of its parts. Courtyards punctuated by towers set in lush landscapes and a set of processional entrances match the openness, energy and optimism of the curriculum we are designing.

Much like its educational mission, the architecture of Yale-NUS, while keenly aware of its antecedents, is strongly committed to the ideas and responsibilities of this century and, in this way, is also a vision for the future.

A metaphor used by Mahatma Gandhi in response to the relevance of the study of English liter-

ature for Indians articulates well our goal of bringing East and West together in a powerful and profound dialogue at Yale-NUS College.

He wrote: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

May the cultures of Asia, the West and the entire world blow freely through the buildings of Yale-NUS College and into the minds of many generations of students. And may we send those students into the world standing proudly on their own feet.

The writer is the president of Yale-NUS College. This article is based on the professor's remarks yesterday at the groundbreaking for Yale-NUS College at the National University of Singapore.