

## Culture Collide or Culture Coincide?

*Background Interviews to Assess the Practicalities of a Hybrid Hostel/International House*

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# 1. Introduction and Thesis Statement

Because my final graduate design project is to design a cooperatively-organized grass-roots hybrid hostel / International House, geared toward internationally-oriented people in the city of Portland, I wanted to find out what draws tourists and international people to Portland, as well as what these people may be missing in their experience here. I wanted to know this so that my building can emphasize the positives of Portland, while also filling in gaps. I was also interested in the experience of residents living in a prototypical successful International House so that I could find out what makes it successful as well as learning what improvements are possible.

I conducted two interviews: one with Jim Kennett, owner of the International Student House and HI-Portland Hostel Northwest, both buildings located in Portland, Oregon; and another interview with Suchitra Saxena, former resident of the first International House, in New York City.

## 2. Interview Transcripts

### 2.1. *Jim Kennett: hostel owner*

#### 2.1.1. Background

Jim Kennett started his first hostel in 1980: the Sea Star Hostel in Bandon, Oregon (see his website). From there he went on to create the Seaside Hostel in Seaside, Oregon, and is now the director of HI-Portland Hostel Northwest. His son manages the International Student House of Portland. I was excited to talk with Kennett because of his varied experience with hostels in Oregon, and his connection to the International Student House.

According to the Hostelling International USA website, Hostelling International (HI) is an organization that provides standards for hostels. Inspectors regularly verify these standards through inspection visits to HI-licensed hostels.

Kennett informed me that the building that houses the HI-Portland Hostel Northwest was built in 1889 and remodeled in 1989. Original moldings remain, but sheet rock and office sprinklers have been added. Originally the hostel was in an attached building, and

had 36 beds. A more recent renovation has brought the hostel up to 70 dorm beds and 12 private rooms. When full, the building can house over 110 people. If every bed and extra cot were used, it could hold 130 people.

### **2.1.2. Guest demographics**

There are two main types of hostel guests: FITs or “Free and Independent Travelers,” and Groups. FITs are on their own or with one to two friends. These guests need to know what’s happening in the Portland area. Group travelers are 10 to 60 people visiting Portland together: they may be wedding parties, or international groups on retreats. Girl Scouts and Break Away are two groups that often use the hostel. These groups require marketing in order to attract them.

The HI-Portland Hostel Northwest’s number one international traveler is Japanese. The hostel has 60% international visitors and less than 1% of its visitors have disabilities.

### **2.1.3. Staff**

There are four staff members who live on-site. There are a total of nine staff members, six of whom work full time. The back room used to be a two bed-room apartment but has been converted into private rooms.

### **2.1.4. Dorm-bed rooms**

Kennett showed me a 6-dormbed room. Pocket doors have been sheet rocked, but could be restored back to their original condition. Hostelling International requires a 30” egress from each bed, unless it is a single bed with no end-board. Standard size for a dorm-bed room is 30 to 40 square feet per bed (not per bunk). Kennett recommended using a double switch system in the dorm-bed rooms, because guests often return to their rooms in the middle of the night and turn on the lights. A double switch system which turned on indirect lights would avoid the conflicts that occur in these situations.

### **2.1.5. Bathrooms**

Next, Kennett showed me the first floor bathrooms. Privacy is important in showers—guests prefer private changing areas for each individual shower. The hostel

has motion sensors for turning on exhaust fans because guests do not know to turn these on and off. Between the two buildings, there are 20 bathrooms. For a domestic bathroom, where you can lock the door on the whole bathroom with a bathtub/shower, sink, and toilet, a rule of thumb is six people per bathroom, and one sink to six people. For group bathrooms, you can use one shower for 15 people and one toilet for 10 people. Ideally, bathroom floors should be tile with a floor drain.

The HI Portland Hostel-Northwest plans to have three accessible bathrooms, meaning that toilet rooms have a 5-foot turnaround radius, and bathtubs and showers have hand rails and seats.

### **2.1.6. Entry/hallway**

Kennett then showed me the hallway, and we looked at its large bulletin board that informs guests of activities going on in the Portland area, such as happy hours, and staff favorites. Bulletin boards should match the clientele: for hostels it should highlight inexpensive attractions and restaurants. One of the weekly chores of staff is to go through the newspapers and post weekly events on the bulletin boards.

### **2.1.7. Private rooms**

Private rooms in the HI-Portland Hostel Northwest are fairly large and roomy compared to a typical hotel room. In the high season, they typically cost \$69 a night with a shared bath. Some of these rooms also contain a fold-out couch. One of the private rooms contains a double and a single bed.

### **2.1.8. Common kitchen**

The common kitchen has cabinets, a sink, and a refrigerator. The hostel plans to add a commercial vent and a 3-compartment sink. Kennett suggested leaving doors off the cabinets, because it's easier for short-term guests to understand where things go when you have open cabinets.

### **2.1.9. Security**

The HI-Portland Hostel Northwest uses keycards, which expire 20 minutes after checkout. They also will not work if the visitor has not paid up. The keycard allows the last 300 room users to be tracked, in case of theft.

### **2.1.10. Practicalities of a hybrid hostel / residence in Portland**

I also spoke with Kennett about the practicality of locating a 250-bed hostel downtown. He thought it wouldn't be practical because of parking—a significant proportion of hostel visitors drive. Kennett also stated that HI licensing is critical to the success of hostels, especially for international guests, for marketing reasons. Portland in particular is not known on the international circuit. There is not much word of mouth about Portland among tourists. Tourists come to Portland as a stopover on their way between San Francisco and Seattle. They may decide to stay longer than planned once they arrive in Portland, but Portland is not typically a destination, unlike other Northwest cities like Seattle, Washington, and Vancouver, British Columbia.

Kennett thought that a combination of an International House and a hostel could work well. An International House would be a good source of volunteers for the hostel—for organizing group events. On the other hand, it is important to keep their respective common areas separate, especially kitchens, because long-term residents tend to become territorial, and become annoyed when short-term guests make use of their stuff. A café might be a more appropriate area than a kitchen to use as a common area for both long-term and short-term residents. There could be other common areas that would be used for organized activities and meetings between the two groups.

The HI-Portland Hostel Northwest makes extensive use of volunteers for group activities such as bike tours, pub crawls, and first Thursday gallery openings. In the future, there will be 6 bicycles on-site available for rental. The bikes are owned by a bicycle coop, and the money will be split 50/50 between the hostel and the coop. That way, the hostel does not have to deal with insurance issues.

### **2.1.11. Hostels in other cities**

Seattle has 300 hostel beds, which is not enough. Vancouver has 2000 hostel beds (at least in the summer). San Francisco has 180 beds in each of its 3 hostels. Kennett thought that, on or near the West Coast, new HI hostels would be most likely to be approved in Olympia, Washington; Eugene, Oregon; Corvallis, Oregon; Santa Barbara, California; San Luis Obispo, California; and Denver, Colorado. None of these cities currently has an HI-licensed hostel. Kennett didn't think that a hostel would be economically viable in Tacoma, Washington. A hostel requires either a large city (like Denver) or a town with a sizable university.

### **2.1.12. The positives of the HI-Portland Hostel Northwest**

Visitors enjoy the HI-Portland Hostel Northwest because of its location: its access to coffee shops, shopping, and feeling of safety in the hostel and in the neighborhood. Atmosphere, cleanliness, and historic features are important as well. Guests also enjoy internet access, a courtesy/guest phone with free local calls, and inexpensive long distance phone cards on sale. Some guests are moving to Portland and applying for jobs so they appreciate the alarm clocks, hair dryers, and ironing boards. The hostel is good about addressing issues—its next step is to add even more internet access, as well as a second courtesy/guest phone.

### **2.1.13. The International Student House of Portland**

I also spoke with Kennett about the International Student House of Portland. There are three criteria for residence at the International Student House: (1) greater than 30 days stay, (2) international status, (3) your stay is for educational purposes. The house has seven private rooms, so it has seven residents. Students do weekly chores. They pay a one-time non-refundable \$50 maintenance fee.

## **2.2. Suchitra Saxena: I-House resident**

### **2.2.1. Background**

Suchitra Saxena lived in the New York City International House from September, 2002, until June, 2003, while she attended her first year of graduate school at Columbia University. She was studying international economic and political development. The New York City International House is at 500 Riverside Drive, across from the Manhattan School of Music, and about 6 blocks away from Columbia University.

### **2.2.2. Rules for residence and demographics**

To live at the International House, you had to be over 21, and a graduate student at a school in New York City. People could stay in the International House for a maximum of three years. Some people spent all three years there, but most stayed only one year, especially people who were only there for a one-year internship. Over the summer the rules about age and educational status were more flexible.

Residence at the International House was not restricted to international students; however, most Americans who were there came from different backgrounds and from different parts of the country. There seemed to be an emphasis on arts, with a lot of students studying at Julliard or the Manhattan School of Music. There were also students studying dance or going to film school. There were always journalism, law, and medical students. Only 20% or fewer of the students were Americans.

### **2.2.3. Marketing**

Saxena applied to Columbia for housing—her permanent house was in New Jersey, and she was also living in New Haven. Columbia University housing gives priority to people coming from farthest away. The housing brochure (information packet) from Columbia mentioned the I-House as an alternative.

An essay is required to get into the International House, but not recommendations. Scholarships were possible.

Saxena noticed that quite a few people were doing internships with companies, so she speculated that companies may have set them up with up to stay at the International House. It could also be that they found out about it from friends.

#### **2.2.4. Building organization and room descriptions**

The International House (I-House) was divided into two buildings: I-House North and I-House South, and were connected on the ground floor in convoluted ways. I-House South was all single rooms, and was ten stories high. The lower floors were cheaper. Saxena lived on a lower floor, in one of the small single-person bedrooms.

Upper floors had larger rooms, some with their own bathrooms. The floors with single rooms had two communal bathrooms, and a floor shaped like a U. Saxena's floor was co-ed floor, with men on one side and women on other.

I-House North had apartments, where group living was possible, in the form of families and married people or groups of friends. You could always request if you wanted to share an apartment with a friend. Apartments in the I-House North had kitchens and bathrooms. There was no dining hall on this side of the building.

There was a study room as well as music practice rooms. Every floor had a common room. Also, there was a TV room with snack machines, as well as a pub, open every night till 2 am, with pool tables and a big-screen TV.

There were three large beautiful common space living rooms in the building with murals, living areas, and a library. These were used for events, such as films and lectures. Each of these common spaces could hold up to 200 people. They were well taken care of. There was also a very nice gym and an outdoor balcony, big enough for 50 people. People would take hibachis out on the balcony and grill food.

The bedrooms were very basic, and very small. Saxena's room cost \$700 per month. It contained a bed, a desk, a dresser, a bookcase and a closet. It had a twin bed, and someone could have uncomfortably slept on the floor. The bed was the width of the room. The idea was that residents should always be with other people.

### **2.2.5. Problems with the building**

You could hear everything going on in nearby rooms—the building was designed so that everybody could meet and become friends. It was difficult to be a serious student because it was a very social environment. Saxena moved out after a year because the environment was distracting.

The I-House South did not allow microwaves or hotpots, but people would have makeshift kitchens. You had to pay to use the common kitchen, yet it was not taken care of. All I-House residents were required to be on the meal plan. The food was good but the hours weren't regimented enough. They needed a better kitchen facility. However, the dining room was really nice, very social, with lots of light. Furniture was basic in both houses. Apartments in I-House North weren't that nice, although some had nice views. The top floor rooms of I-House South were really beautiful and huge; they were New York City studio apartments, and overlooked the Hudson River. The ninth floor had its own balcony.

There was no privacy, especially in I-House South. It was hard to live in a “frat house” atmosphere after living on your own. There was a prayer room somewhere but one Muslim person couldn't concentrate on praying in his room. Everyone was an adult at a different stage of their adulthood.

Saxena's room was across from the elevator, so she could always hear the elevator ding. There was a rule that you weren't supposed to take the elevator after 11:30pm. But this rule, like many other International House rules, was ignored.

### **2.2.6. Good things about the building**

People loved the pub especially around international sports events like World Cup Soccer and World Cup Cricket. Some residents chipped in and bought a satellite dish for the pub so everyone could watch World Cup Cricket. The pub had a DJ booth and sold beer and wine. The other room in the pub had a pool table, and you could also smoke there.

People loved the social aspect. It was easy to make friends. Not everybody was going to Columbia so it was fun to meet people from other schools. The diversity was great.

Saxena went to Nepal for part of her studies, and got to know Nepalese people at the I-House before her trip. She is still very close friends with people she met while staying at the I-House.

### **3. Conclusions**

The interview with Jim Kennett provided helpful information about dorm-room and bathroom sizing. It also convinced me that I should separate areas for long-term residence (greater than one month) from the areas for short-term residence (less than two weeks). It may be important to add some new spaces to the building program which allow short-term and long-term visitors to meet in an organized way. Finally Kennett felt strongly that, for a hostel to succeed, it should have the Hostelling International stamp of approval. Because two HI hostels already exist in Portland, it is unlikely that another one would be approved. I may want to consider placing my building in another city.

From the interview with Suchitra Saxena, I concluded that my design project would benefit from sound isolation between private rooms. This interview also confirmed the importance of common living areas, prayer rooms, libraries and kitchens in the building program.

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