

Essay on SHAUS

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‘Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible’ -Frank Zappa

The past few years have seen several blows by the MIT administration against what is commonly referred to as ‘East Side’ culture, most notably the demolition of Bexley hall and the replacement of current Senior House residents and rules with graduate housing. Regardless of intention, comparatively little has been done by the administration to reverse or mitigate these losses. This has many concerned, the present author among them. If any progress with the administration is to be made, however, a clear platform and plan of action are needed. Firstly we must better understand and defend our basic assumption: is the attack on East side culture a bad thing, and if so, why? Only after this can we understand what parts of the culture are important or harmful, what we are willing to change to please the administration, and what is to be done. This is my attempt to answer the first question. I write as a former participant in East side culture, and my opinions are my own.

To understand why this is bad, we have to understand why MIT needs the East side, and a crucial issue here is the relationship between the values of the East side and the core values of MIT.

At my graduation, President Reif urged my class to ‘hack the world’. ‘Hack the world’ means to not accept the status quo but to question it, with the end goal of replacing it with something even better. It means always pushing the boundaries, whether dealing with smartphones, space travel, or scientific theories. And to remember (quoting President Reif quoting Joi Ito) that ‘you don’t get a Nobel prize for doing what you’re told’.

But hacking the world doesn’t just mean innovating in the fields of technology and the sciences. The same thought process can be applied to social norms and social structures. Instead of asking ‘Is this the best way to build an OS or is there a better way?’, one can ask such questions as ‘is monogamy the best way to get happiness from my relationships, or is there a better way?’. Much of the East side’s nonconformity revolves around sexuality, gender, and drugs, but there’s no reason to exclude unexplored territory of alternate philosophical systems, ways of arranging privacy in a community, etc. While individual results and solutions offered may be good or bad, it is this attitude of critical thought and experimentation which is crucial to the cultures of intellectual progress, MIT, and the East side in particular.

Rebelliousness and nonconformity can be seen even among intellectual heroes. Steve Jobs was unapologetic about his use of LSD and general involvement in hippie culture in his youth. Alexander Grothendieck, considered by many the greatest mathematician of the twentieth century, was once denied a Harvard position for refusing to sign a document promising not to work to overthrow the US government. It is unreasonable for the administration to expect highly intelligent, thoughtful, and questioning people to always be ‘well-behaved’ by their standards.

East side culture is also highly welcoming to many students who would not otherwise have a home at MIT, but this in the present author’s opinion is a consequence of the above; it is because these students are the students who are passionate about challenging social norms and thus would be isolated among those who are not. This applies whether they have an outside-the-norm sexuality, gender expression, life philosophy, drug use, etc.

East side culture is an integral part of MIT. It is not a fingernail which the institute can cut without consequence; it is an arm or even a vital organ. The values of the East side are not accidental or orthogonal to values of MIT, they are deeply entwined consequences of them. The administration attacks the East side at MIT’s own risk.

In spite of the above, the administration’s action are not unjustified. To say that innovation and questioning are to be celebrated does not mean that every new and different way of doing things will be successful, and I do not endorse every specific nonconformity practiced by East side residents. The excessive drug use of Senior House and long graduation times were problems. Any plan to preserve or restore East side culture must take these into account and have checks against them.

The biggest obstacle I see to this is the conflict between an administration which legally must take the position that all drug use is bad and dangerous, and a set of students who to varying degrees honestly and sincerely disagree. In my observations, the latter set includes many highly intelligent, responsible, and academically successful users, as well as people with drug problems, and some people who don’t use drugs at all but respect the decisions of others. If the administration were capable of changing its position on this issue, I would advocate that the former group identify themselves to the extent possible without compromising themselves, and the administration adopt a drug policy geared more towards encouraging responsible and informed choices for those interested, rather than zero tolerance, but for legal reasons this is a moot point.

It is crucial to make social norms an issue in this fight. Students who have raised concerns solely about mental health issues had no response to the Pilot 2021 program with its focus on ‘wellness’. Similarly, arguing on the basis of LGBTetc leaves no response to the fact that the West Side is not full of racist homophobes (I apologize to anyone who has had strong negative experiences and believes this is false). Arguing that Senior House does not have a drug culture can be refuted by looking at the Senior House ‘ $\Lambda\Sigma\Delta$ ’ dorm t-shirts. Evading facts or making issues primary which should be secondary is futile. Nonconformity is one of if not the most essential attributes of East side culture,

and should not be downplayed.

Translating the above principles into a workable reality would require planning and devotion of resources, but first we must decide on the correct base on which to move forward. I would urge those concerned not to give up on the East side, even if we lose the battle for Senior House. The present administration may question whether East side culture is worth the effort, but I believe I have demonstrated that MIT cannot afford to exist without the East side.