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Dear Colleague:

Science Hall, from the outside, is a picture of stability. Inside? Well, in my six years of residence here, it seems to me that workmen are always in the building to drill holes in the wall, take down the ceiling, add a partition, and so on. People are like that too. From the outside, we too are pictures of stability: you can count on our social behavior and work schedules. Inside, by contrast, is almost constant change: as soon as an idea is put in it has to be repainted if not taken down again; good feelings have to be buttressed, bad ones--like cancer-causing asbestos--removed.

While I am on the subject of buildings, let me tell you about a curious preference of mine. When I travel I prefer to check into a motel rather than stay with a friend. I used to think the reason lies in fatigue: after the long hours on the road, and after the nice sociable dinner, I yearn for the mindless comfort that only TV in a motel room can provide. But I now think there is another reason. In a friend's home, when I withdraw into a bedroom I do not find that I have thereby left the stimulating conversation behind; on the contrary, it continues more intensely than ever--not by my host, who has just wished me good-night, but by his things. What does this book on Antarctica mean? I have not known that he has a yen for Polar exploration. Or does the book belong to his daughter? What do I, after all, know about their relationship? What is the china pineapple doing on the mantelpiece? What has caused the stain on the rug? It is not that I poke around and ask these questions; rather they jump at me--they emerge out of things with varying degrees of pathos, eloquence, and forcefulness. You see, there is no closure when you withdraw into a bedroom in you friend's house, as there is in a neutrally furnished--hence, mute--motel room. The move from friend's house to a motel is a move from a thick to a thin world. But the move from the family's living room to the family's bedroom may well be the other way round--a move from prose to poetry. Under the circumstance, how can one relax? How is the drift into oblivion tolerable in the face of one's sudden awareness that the conversational intimacy in the living room is an illusion?

Best wishes,

