

Macalester's cultural house: Past, Present and Future

Walking into Macalester's Cultural House doesn't feel like walking into a residence hall. Up a short, narrow, creaky flight of stairs, three people — none of whom actually live in the house — chat over plates of brownies and flan in the large kitchen. Music drifts from the spotlessly clean living room across the hall, where a resident has claimed a full table with his notebooks and binders.

The Cultural House, or C-House, is something between a house, a residence hall and a public event space. The residential aspect, co-managed by the Department of Multicultural Life and Residential Life, houses students of color and Indigenous students who want to live in an intentional community that centers identity. The C-House is also the main area of programming for Macalester's cultural organizations and identity collectives, hosting frequent meetings, cooking nights and public events.

Tegra Myanna, assistant director of the DML and the person in charge of DML C-House oversight, said many student applications to live in the C-house mention a desire for a tight-knit space that welcomes conversations about identity. These conversations, they said, aren't always possible to have in a typical dorm, and many students relay poor experiences from their first year residence halls.

“There's a way that you perform in that [typical first-year dorm] space that's different than how you would authentically be if the space was made for you,” Myanna said. “The idea of having to

go back to their room and also do that performance because their roommate is someone who doesn't understand their experience or doesn't have the same kind of knowledge about what it means to be a student of color here — I think that can be exhausting.”

Before the C-House, Macalester's multicultural programming included several identity houses. Constructed in the early 1970s after the college fully integrated in 1968, the Black House, American Indian House and the Hispanic House were popular living, gathering and organizing spaces for students of color.

But at the end of the decade, after the defunding of the Expanded Educational Opportunities program — which provided scholarships to primarily black, Indigenous, Mexican, and Puerto Rican students — the enrollment of students of color at Macalester fell drastically. In 1983, the cultural houses closed down and the college relocated their programming to the Student Union.

It wasn't long before students demanded more space. So, just four years later, cultural programming officially moved to Macalester's first C-House at 34 Macalester Street in 1987. In 1999, the House moved to its current location at 37 Macalester Street.

Now, 20 years later, the next chapter in the C-House's story may be upon it. The structure, which was built in 1922, is just shy of 100 years old and isn't aging gracefully.

Since Assistant Vice President for Facilities Services Nathan Lief came to the college in the fall of 2013, Facilities has spent approximately \$500,000 on the C-House.

“In my opinion, that building is not in great condition and it would take a lot more money to rehab it, and so I think the program and the college would be better off if we were able to move that program someplace else and either into a new facility or into someplace new on-campus that was better-taken care of and more modernized,” Lief said. “There’s nothing dangerous about the building, it’s just that to rehab it to like-new condition — that would take an extreme amount of work.”

According to Lief and C-House residents, in recent years, the house has been plagued by the kinds of issues all old buildings face — unreliable heating units, an oven missing a knob or two and an odyssey of pest issues.

A mouse problem in the C-House in 2017 was one of the most perplexing Lief had ever seen.

“The mice were scaling the exterior of the building, going up through that parapet, underneath part of the roof and then into the building,” Lief said. “I’ve been doing facility management for about 20 years and I’ve never seen anything like that..”

Even more seriously, the building is not compliant with the standards required by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

“I have a chronic knee condition, and I can’t always use stairs,” said Briah Cooley ’21, second-time C-House resident and co-chair of Black Liberation Affairs Committee. “The C-House is not

ADA accessible, at all. You literally have to go up stairs to get to the first floor and then all the residents' rooms are on the second floor.”

Lief said the lack of ADA compliance is one of the most pressing — and potentially most expensive — challenges facing the C-House.

“To make it ADA compliant, because you’re on three floors, you would have to add an elevator,” Lief said. “There’s no good place to put one, so you’d end up tacking it onto the building someplace and that would compromise programming that’s there. You’d probably have to remove bedrooms to do it, just because there’s no place to put it.”

The C-House’s woes don’t end with the building itself. The house also faces an outsized demand from students who want to live in or use the space. Last spring semester, 30 students applied for the C-House’s 10 spots, meaning that more students were turned away than accepted into the space.

Furthermore, different cultural student groups that host events in the space face scheduling conflicts and overcrowding.

“When it came to reserving spaces such as the MPR [Multipurpose Room] and the kitchen for events such as a general community meeting or an ITKW (In The Kitchen With), it was always hard because there’s so many organizations that have already reserved ahead of time,” said Tara Mercene ’20, co-chair of student org Filipinos at Mac (FAM).

“We would always have to take a chance at making sure a date would be free but we would always figure out backup dates in case.”

Adelante!, Macalester’s Latinx identity collective, usually meets at 9 or 10 p.m. and often doesn’t have to compete for meeting space. Co-chair Jonathan Alvarado ’21 said that even so, he still worries about “invading” the living space of the C-House residents.

“We have to acknowledge it’s a place where students live,” Alvarado said. “So, if we’re there late in the evening, we’ve got to be respectful of their time and their space because even though it’s open to us orgs, it’s a place where students actually live.

“There’s nothing wrong with sharing the space,” he continued. “I think we just need more space so we don’t have to worry about conflicting schedules.”

That being said, he sees the appeal of having a space unique to Adelante!.

Alvarado pointed out that at other colleges, including the University of Minnesota, identity collectives have spaces of their own on campus. La Raza, the Latinx identity collective at the University, has its own room in Coffman Memorial Union on campus.

“We were just kind of awed at their space because it was just really cool,” Alvarado said. “They mentioned, ‘Oh, we painted the walls at the start of the semester, all these paintings just stay up.’ And we were asking, kind of naïvely, ‘Does this stuff *stay* up?’”

“It was just so nice,” he continued. “It was like, oh shoot, if only Macalester had a space we could make our own.”

Carleton College, another Minnesota liberal arts college, has a similar cultural housing model to the one Mac had in the 70s. Students have the option of living in one of four different cultural-identity houses: The Asia House, La Casa del Sol (a Latinx identity house), the Freedom House (an African-American identity house), and an Intercultural House.

Bruce Yang is the Assistant Director of Intercultural and International Life at Carleton. Part of his role is to oversee the cultural housing programs at Carleton. In his eyes, the different cultural houses are crucial to avoiding lumping different racial and ethnic groups all into one “multicultural” category.

“I think acknowledging the differences within these different racial groups is really important,” Yang said. “I think not doing so would possibly misrepresent these smaller ethnic groups that fall within these broader racial categories.”

Cooley feels similarly about the C-House.

“I don’t like [the C House name], because it kind of reminds me of how I don’t like the term POC because I feel like it’s either a statistic or a grouping term,” Cooley said. “Putting them all into one is a little frustrating.”

Feedback from residents across the cultural houses at Carleton, meanwhile, is overwhelmingly positive.

“[The cultural housing program] really gives them a voice, gives them a sense of belonging and makes them feel at home,” Yang said.

“At the same time there’s also the argument of whether we are segregating these student populations, or why don’t we just have a bigger multicultural center for everyone?” he continued. “And that’s going to be an ongoing debate because I don’t think that there is quite an answer.”

Some students at Macalester concur with Yang’s sentiment, and prefer having unified cultural spaces rather than siloed ones.

“I feel like it’s still nice to have it together,” C-House resident Sherry Cheng ‘22 said. “There are the cultural orgs for that, so I think it’s kind of nice to have a blend.”

This idea of unity among students of color is part of Dean of Multicultural Life Marjorie Trueblood's philosophy. She said that Mac students represent a more diverse array of racial and cultural identities than they did in the 1970s.

"I don't know that we need to restore a Black House or a Hispanic House or a Native American House," Trueblood said. "I don't know if it's about that, because there are other groups now that we have on campus that also make up the multicultural fabric of our community."

Whether it means restoring the former cultural houses or reimagining multicultural programming at Macalester altogether, students resoundingly highlight the need for more spaces for students of color on campus.

Just two campus spots strike Alvarado as comfortable, non-institutional spaces for students of color: the C-House and the Sounds of Blackness lounge on the first floor of Turck Hall. He said these places feel safe. Kitchens, comfortable couches, and vibrant art on the walls help the visage of Macalester as an institution fade away. In its place is a haven for students of color — a home.

While Kagin Commons, home of the Department of Multicultural Life, and the Campus Center are often used to host cultural org or identity collective meetings, sharing these spaces with other campus institutions means that students of color often feel stifled or on edge. Even other on-campus residential spaces can feel constraining.

“Even if you’re in your dorm, you’re aware that you’re in a dorm and there’s always that pressure,” Alvarado said. those thoughts of having to do something for school, having to do something academic.”

C-House residents have been having more conversations about changes they’d like to see since an architect came to look at the House earlier this semester as part of the college’s efforts to draw up a strategic plan for future space use.

Besides the most pressing needs, like moving the program to an accessible space and expanding the space to house more residents, both residents and staff have thought about the possibility of separating program space from residential space.

“A reimagined Cultural House that would have a floor for public use and event space and then a space where residents would have their own lounge and kitchen would be incredible,” Myanna said.

Alvarado’s vision includes spaces for each cultural org to call its own.

“At least what I imagine it to be, would be a space where people instantly know... of course, that’s the Adelante! space,” Alvarado said.

“Hopefully, it would be separating campus life and then having a different kind of space,” he continued. “Where we can just relax and have that added layer of knowing you’re with people

who share your identity or share aspects of your identity and you can hopefully form an additional community while being a student at Macalester.”

It’s not that students don’t like the C-House itself — for decades, it has served as a second home for many students of color. But the program needs an upgrade.

“I really like it,” Cooley said. “I feel like I’ve said a lot of things, and it sounds like I might not like it, but I really do like living there. I just wish it was more homey and more accessible.”

Info Box 1: Photographs of the C-House



The C-House kitchen is both the residents' cooking space and a popular event space for cultural orgs and identity collectives.



The Multipurpose Room (MPR) serves as a living room for the residents and a meeting space for cultural orgs and Department of Multicultural Life programming.



C-House resident Sherry Cheng '22 stands in front of a game shelf in the kitchen. "I felt like I wanted to be in a community of people of color, and I felt like that would be a good way to make friends and just to be with people that I'm familiar with,"

Cheng said of her first year living in the C-House.

Info Box 2: The Past 5 Years of C-House Renovations

Year	Project Description
2014	New roof installed in the Cultural House.
2015	Card access installed, requiring student IDs to access the building.
2016	New boiler installed.
2017	New fire panel and room devices added.
2017	New carpet, marmoleum and refinished wood floors in the common areas
2017	Paint in common areas and rooms added.

2017	Upgraded furniture in common areas.
2017	New AV installed in living room.
2018	New windows in entire building.
2018	Remodeled restrooms on all floors
2018	Paint and plaster added to exterior.
2019	Removed chimney and patch roof.
2019	Exterior camera coverage added around building to increase security.