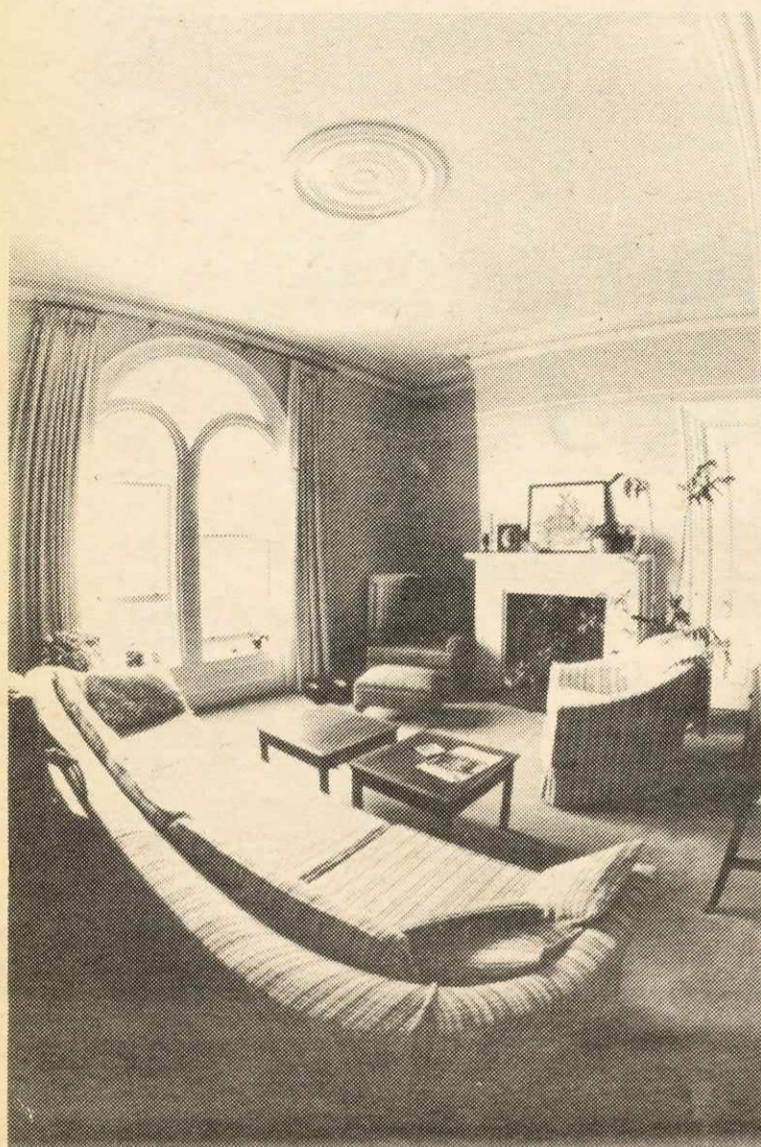


A VISIT TO THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE --NOT YOUR AVERAGE



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An example of the rooms set aside for MacKay family use in the residence. Neat'n'tidy taken to an extreme.

by Ken Burke

From your own personal habitat to Charles Foster Kane's fabulous "Xanadu" palace in the film *Citizen Kane* you can tell a lot about someone by the home they keep. Besides being a place to sleep, your home is also a reflection of your habits, hobbies, financial reality (or fantasies), and in general the way YOU do things.

If you find any truth in the above statement, and have an interest in Dalhousie University, the large white house at 1460 Oxford Street just might interest you. It probably should, with almost a half-million dollars of university funding having been spent two years ago on its renovation and conversion to a university facility many or most students know relatively little about. What is this building? It's the University President's Residence, and currently the home of Dal president Andrew MacKay.

The building began its career as the residence of Dalhousie's presidents on September 1, 1925; as a gift by Dal alumnus and soon-to-be-Prime Minister Richard B. Bennett. The house served as the president's residence until Henry Hicks' appointment as President in 1963. Hicks decided to remain at his own nearby house and use 1460 Oxford for housing several university departments until incoming President MacKay made the decision to move in.

After its re-opening as the official President's Residence one

and one half years ago, the house was the centre of controversy over the expenditure of a whopping \$420,000 in renovations before MacKay moved in. The price tag was also unveiled not long after it was discovered the university had developed a multi-million dollar deficit.

Faculty, staff and student leaders all followed these revelations by expressing outrage at the renovations' cost. Some called for the outright sale of the house to lessen the university's debt, most voices except the administration pointed to the house as a symbol of both the administration's financial waste and its concern with its own appearance. The Administration countered that the renovations were only approved on the basis of a contractor's estimate of \$180,000 in costs. The price tag began to escalate with later discoveries such as the almost-complete ruin of the house's electrical and plumbing systems and the discovery of a stream running through the basement more than ten feet underneath the original wooden floor.

"If I had known what the ultimate costs would be, I would not have recommended to the Board that we undertake this project," said President MacKay in a recent interview. Vice-President (Finance and Administration) Robbie Shaw also expressed regret at the more than doubled renovations bill at the House's opening. In a University News article of Dec. 10, 1981, Shaw is

quoted as saying, "It is not easy for the layman to understand how that (the overrun) could happen. It is not even easy for someone like myself, who has been in the building business."

These assurances of innocence have not silenced critics who claim that a good original estimate was not emphasized strongly enough. Among these critics was Peter Rans, 1982-83 Student Union president, who said "I think the timing of the expenditure was awful and the estimates were very poorly done."

Evident also is that the splash the 420-grand renovations is still being felt in ponds bigger than Dalhousie. Both Peter Rans and Students' Union of Nova Scotia Executive Officer Peter Kavanagh have said that provincial Education Minister Terry Donahoe brought up the house as reason not to provide needed funding for the university. According to Rans, "Every time we went to Donahoe nine months ago we'd say we need money and he'd say 'Oh yeah, you need another President's House...'"

Despite the initial attention paid to the residence over the cost of renovations, the house seems to have disappeared from public attention. Periodically, some group on campus brings up a call to sell the House, as several faculty members did during the 1982 contract negotiations, but even these statements seem to be made half-heartedly. Initial interest seems to be gone and indifference largely rules the day. As Paddy Burt, current Dal Faculty Association (DFA) president said, "I've ceased to think about it. It doesn't tend to stay in the memory." Burt said she never "took the trouble" to go to the house and wasn't aware of what facilities it had.

Most Canadian universities provide residences for their university presidents, but this isn't true everywhere. Some, such as St. Francis Xavier University, provide their president with a suite of rooms in a university building. Several universities in Western Canada let their president fend for her- or him- self in finding shelter. With the large expenditures made at many universities on these facilities, it's fair to ask why the emphasis on providing the president's residence?

President MacKay said the principle use of the house is to have "a place to receive and meet people of the university on occasion."

In more direct terms, the house is thought of as an aid in lobbying visitors and alumni for contributions to the university. University receptions at the house are an opportunity for the university and its administration to show the "class" of the university, although many faculty, staff, and student leaders feel there are other areas available for receptions.

Former Student Union president Peter Rans believes President MacKay and the Board of

Governors are misreading public opinion in their use of the house. "Most people (outside Dalhousie) don't buy the argument that the President has to live in a house like that," he said, "but I think a number of the Board of Governors members really believe the house is necessary as a facility for contributions."

While Student Union president Tim Hill feels some kind of residence should be provided for the president, he said, "a residence of that size may not be necessary. If you get rid of that House, you're going to have to buy a smaller house," he stated.

When both student and faculty representatives were questioned on the amount of use their groups received from the house, dissatisfaction was evident. According to DFA president Burt "they certainly haven't publicized the house on campus."

"I really can't think of a use for it," she added.

Rans thought that other than at special occasions such as graduations, students rarely use the facilities. Hill agreed with the former DSU president, stating that "A few members of the student elite, or the graduating class might use it, but as far as I know the student use is basically zero."

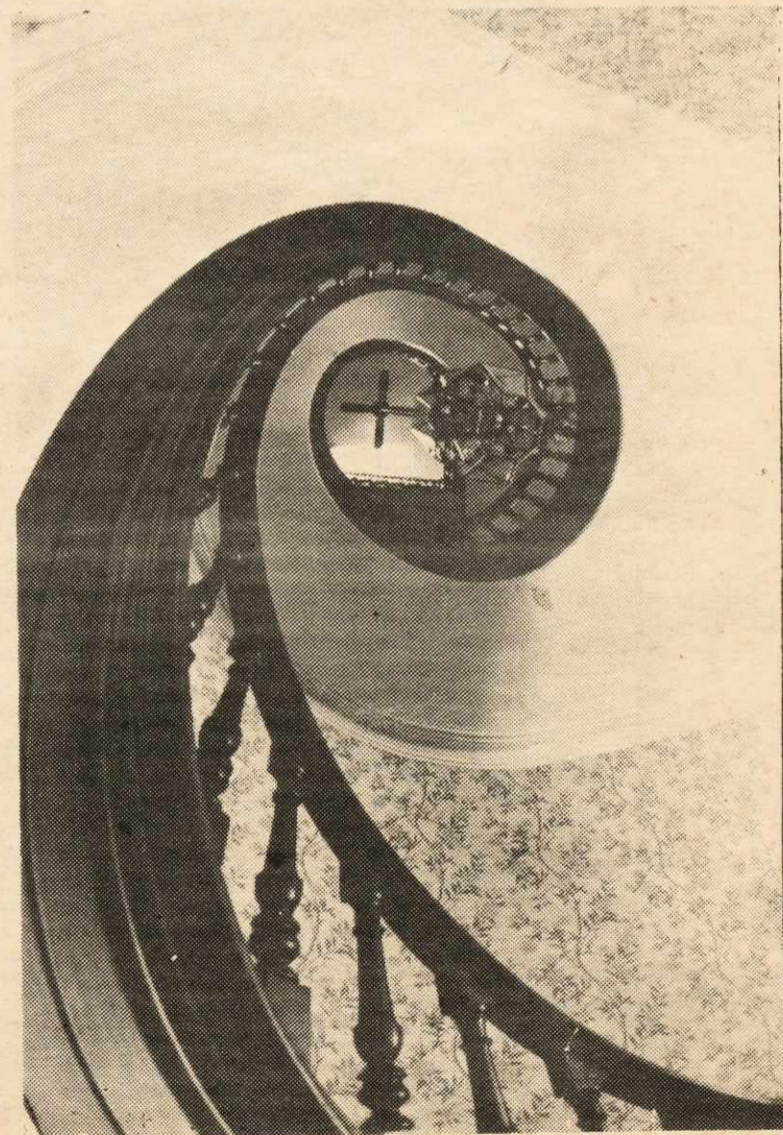
Despite these opinions the administration feels the house is well-utilized and are planning to bring more students in this year.

Director of Housing John Graham said, "I think it's very highly used for university purposes," noting that the MacKay family rarely use the ground floor and they "live in a quite restricted area." MacKay expressed his goal to bring every first-year student to the house at some point over the next year. "There are too few opportunities to give a sense of Dalhousie as a community," he said.

Rans was encouraged by MacKay's statements but expressed concern about the feasibility of such an offer. "I don't see how he can do that and keep their family privacy," he said.

Besides serving as a prestige booster with alumni and visiting dignitaries, a president's house can also be a subtle means of sweetening a President's term of office in a university. Aside from a quite handsome salary and sometimes permanent use of a rented automobile, university property used in the operation of a university is usually zoned into a tax-free classification. Tax-free accommodation plus travel to alumni meetings at places such as the Bahamas, London, New York, or Antigonish can boost a university president's actual salary beyond that generally considered as their wage scale.

To further complicate things, the president's house renova-



This circular staircase is the centerpiece of the House's hallway. Elizabeth Allison died in a fall from the staircase years ago.

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