

USA TODAY – SEPTEMBER 2004

UNIVERSITY HOUSING GOING ‘NEW SCHOOL’

By Haya El Nasser, USA TODAY

Heather McIntosh is an only child. She always had privacy — her own bedroom and bathroom. Until she went to college.

For a year and a half, the hearing and speech sciences major at the University of Maryland lived in a typical dorm: Cramped quarters, a roommate, no air conditioning and a bathroom down the hall.

“I couldn’t take it anymore,” says McIntosh, 20, of Silver Spring, Md.

She was ready to move off campus. But dorms with private rooms, central air and kitchen persuaded her to stay.

“Being able to have my own space... it’s great,” McIntosh says. Her monthly rent at the new South Campus Commons in College Park, Md.: \$615 for a room in a four-bedroom suite with two bathrooms.

McIntosh’s new digs are one sign of the rush by colleges and universities to build stylish dormitories and spiff up old ones to keep up with today’s rising enrollment and the discriminating tastes of students.

Barebones, cinderblock dorms with communal showers that schools built more than 40 years ago for the wave of baby boomers starting college no longer are good enough for their children.

“They come from homes where they didn’t have to share a bedroom and sometimes not even a bath,” says Alton Irwin, senior vice president of marketing at Capstone Development Corp. The Birmingham, Ala., company has developed dorms on 47 campuses.

Many of the more than 16 million college students on U.S. campuses this fall are enjoying new or renovated dorms that offer single rooms, kitchenettes, microwaves, high-speed Internet connections, cable TV, fitness centers, food kiosks and washers and dryers. Even more important to students: air conditioning and bathrooms that are shared by no more than four people.

“Gone are the days when we expect students to have spartan living,” says Warrick Carter, president of Columbia College in Chicago. The school joined two other urban campuses to build the 18-story University Center of Chicago. The center, which opened this year, offers private rooms and baths, art studios and music rooms.

“Not only are we facing gigantic enrollment booms but we have aging facilities, we have deferred maintenance, we have needs for computer connections,” says Jolene Knapp, executive



director of the Society for College and University Planning in Ann Arbor, Mich. “And student preferences are changing so much.”



The upgrades are one reason that room-and-board rates are inching upward at colleges across the nation.

“Parents are ending up paying for a lot of this,” says Christopher Hill, of CBT Architects Inc. in Boston, which has designed student housing for the Harvard Business School and Pennsylvania State University. “They’re interested in giving their sons and daughters the best living environment.”

NEW LOOK ON CAMPUS

The baby boomer wave hit campuses in the 1960s and 1970s. Schools put up dorms as quickly as they could and paid scant attention to comfort and aesthetics. Then, enrollment slowed and even dropped in the early 1980s. The tide is rising again as boomers’ children reach college age. And in today’s economy, college is a must for more high school graduates. “But the block buildings designed to house the most students possible on a floor are not what students are looking for today,” says Dennis Jankiewicz, president of Design Collective Inc. in Baltimore, which designed the University of Maryland complex.



New housing is transforming life on campus. There are “ecodorms” for the environmentally conscious and Starbucks in dorm lobbies for latte lovers. The University of Kansas in Lawrence is considering cell phones for all dorm residents.

Factors driving the boom:

- **HOUSING COSTS.** Urban campuses and community colleges traditionally have relied on students living elsewhere. But commutes are getting longer as housing prices skyrocket. As enrollment rises, colleges that once were content to be commuter schools are building dorms to attract and keep more students.

Jason Hitchings, 23, a second-year law student at Chicago’s DePaul University, spent the past year commuting 90 minutes by train each way from his parents’ home in suburban Palatine. DePaul didn’t have student housing at its downtown campus. Finding a place he could afford in Chicago was out of the question. At least until the University Center of Chicago opened this year.

It took an unusual arrangement among DePaul, Columbia College and Roosevelt University, all within blocks of each other in Chicago’s South Loop. All three needed housing but couldn’t afford downtown land. The city stepped forward with a 3-acre lot it sold for \$1. Mayor Richard Daley had one condition: It had to serve students at all three schools.

The schools formed a non-profit group. A luxury high-rise was built and students flocked to the private rooms and suites and 31,000 square feet of retail in the lobby. Monthly costs: \$660 to \$1,139.

- **TOWN-AND-GOWN RELATIONS.** Friction between residents and students exists in many college towns. Students cram into single-family homes, and neighbors gripe about rowdy parties, traffic and trash.

Keeping students on campus helps. That's partly why Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., built dorms in the 1990s. And the University of Maryland hopes new on-campus housing will not only ease tensions with the community but also help businesses near campus.

- **BOOMER PARENTS ARE MORE INVOLVED.** Famous for their overprotectiveness, today's parents are demanding nicer and safer campus housing for their children. Many pay for their kids' tuition, room-and-board and other fees, and they expect more as bills rise.

To be competitive, schools are building "live-learn" centers that combine rooms, apartments, lounges, classrooms, shops and cafes. They're encouraging juniors and seniors to live on campus to create social interaction among all classes and ages.

This construction spree is likely to continue. In the latest survey by College Planning & Management magazine, 44% of college housing officers said they don't have enough space for students. About 58% called the need to upgrade dorms a major problem; 41% said they plan to do so within five years; 90% said new dorms will offer apartments or shared suites.

"We don't use the 'd' word (dorms) too many times," architect Hill says. "Now they're residence halls."