WSU’s Frederick Linsell House
Uncovering a historical landmark in Detroit

BY WILLIE D. CRUMPLER
The South End

The Frederick Linsell House of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts is one of Wayne State University’s true historic landmarks. Considering its age, the 97-year-old house is in excellent condition and adds a touch of nostalgia to the urban campus. But to truly appreciate the beauty of the Linsell house, one has to first understand the history behind its creation.

In 1904, Frederick Linsell, secretary treasurer of William Wright Co., set out to build his dream home. And with the help of local architect John C. Stahl Jr., Linsell’s dream would soon come true.

After plans were drawn up by Stahl, the lot Linsell had purchased on the corner of Second and Putnam would become the grounds for construction. At a total cost of $9000, the Linsell House was a Georgian-style house that featured the best in fine woodwork and elegant craftsmanship for its time.

Between the years of 1904 and 1930, only three different families would occupy the house. In 1914, the Linsells sold the house to Anson and Fannie Caskey. But once the Caskeys died, the house was given to their daughter, Josephine.

Josephine and her husband, Ralph Bowen, an employee of Ford Motor Co., occupied the house until sometime in the 30s. By this time, WSU began to encroach on the existing homes, and the Linsell House became the Women’s Student Building.

Much like the Linsell House, many homes still existed on Second, despite the gradual expansion of WSU around them. In 1944, however, the entire block was condemned by the city and taken over for public use by the Detroit Board of Education. Sixteen houses and 12 garages were destroyed. And like those before it, the Linsell House was also scheduled for demolition. But in 1956, it was saved after the deed to the block was handed over to the WSU Board of Governors.

A lot has changed since WSU’s decision to keep the Linsell House in tact. Second, the original street the house was built on, has been renamed Gullen Mall after former WSU President George E. Gullen. The campus itself has become a diverse community of students and faculty who hail from different parts of the globe. Many have also witnessed the introduction of multi-million dollar facilities, such as the David Adamany Undergraduate Library, Recreation and Fitness Center, and Law School.

So what makes the Linsell House so special that it is still standing today?

“There are many things about the house that make it a fun place to work,” said David Romas, representative of communications and alumni relations at the Linsell House. “As a whole, it doesn’t have an institutional feel because it feels like you’re coming to a home everyday to work. This place, of course, has a lot of character.”

The Linsell House also features the offices of Linda Moore, dean of the College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts. Prior to housing the offices of the dean, the Linsell House was home to the WSU Biology Department over 14 years ago.

“It’s a very nice atmosphere,” said Moore of the Linsell House. “It’s easy for people to work together.”

With its 13 rooms of beautiful wainscoting paneling and oak woodwork, the house emits more of a southern, down-home feel than that of an office building. Few renovations have been made as the wood on the floors, staircasings and walls are the original materials used back in 1904.

“One of the things that makes it particularly fun to come to work everyday is the fact that we have a full kitchen,” Romas said.

Because the house is so well kept, there’s even a schedule that lets staffers know when it’s their “kitchen week.”

“You’re responsible for that one week to make sure that everything is kept full and that there’s coffee and the dishes get washed, and the sinks are kept clean and the table doesn’t get too junky,” Romas said.

Evidence of modern habitation can be seen in the house’s interior. In order to outfit the building with computers, a networking system was installed in the basement a few years ago, Romas said.

Large rooms have been split in half and fashioned into cubicles. The buzz of telephones and fax machines echo throughout the hallways and stairwells.

Still, the house retains its original allure, which hasn’t been shrouded by dramatic changes to the initial design. But despite the house’s beauty, the age of the building presents small problems such as occasional power outages and limited storage space for files and supplies.

“Sometimes I wish the dean’s office was in a more academic building,” Moore said. “That way I could interact with students more.”