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Mess Hall closes in Rogers Park

The experimental cultural center lasted ten years.

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By Lauren Weinberg

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"Everybody's Got Money Issues" at Mess Hall, 2009.

Photograph: Mess Hall

Stop by Mess Hall (<http://www.messhall.org>)(6932 N Glenwood Ave) before March 29, when the experimental cultural center closes forever, and you might walk out with some new stuff. During my visit to the Rogers Park storefront earlier this month, two passersby came in to select items from a rack of free clothes as a few of Mess Hall's seven keyholders—the artists, activists and writers who run the space—prepared for its final exhibition, the crowdsourced retrospective “Our Collective Future.”

Money never changes hands at Mess Hall. Founded in 2003, it hosts a mix of programs unlike anything else in Chicago, presenting art exhibitions, lectures, film screenings, poetry and craft workshops, Occupy Rogers Park meetings, Food Not Bombs (<http://www.foodnotbombs.net>) meals and the Free Store: a much bigger version of the giveaway I witnessed.

“Since the announcement about closing, the biggest question we’ve gotten is, ‘When’s the Free Store?’,” keyholder Rozalinda Borcila (<http://borcila.com>) says. (It’s March 24.)

Mess Hall can offer free programming because of an unusual arrangement with its landlord, commercial real-estate agent Alan Goldberg, who purchased its building in 1999. “It was kind of a crack house,” Goldberg tells me by phone. A drummer married to a costume designer, the arts enthusiast decided to turn the property into artists’ studios. The storefront housed the cooperative Inclusion Arts Gallery for two years, and when its director decided to pursue other projects, Goldberg sought another tenant.

After he read a *New York Times* article (<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/15/arts/design/15GLUE.html>) that mentioned the artist collective Temporary Services (<http://www.temporaryservices.org>), then based in Chicago, the landlord asked its three members if they would like to use the approximately 700-square-foot space—for free. “They kept trying to figure out what the catch was,” Goldberg recalls.

Five other keyholders ultimately joined Temporary Services in founding Mess Hall. Because they had to pay only for utilities—Goldberg charged \$1 rent per year so Mess Hall could have an official lease, but it’s unclear he ever collected it—Mess Hall could be explicitly noncommercial. It could also avoid the bureaucracy and constraints of becoming a nonprofit.

When cultural spaces charge admission, “that sets up a barrier for some people,” keyholder Lora Lode (<http://www.saic.edu/profiles/faculty/loralode>) explains. “We were adamant that we wanted it to be open.” Temporary Services’ Salem Collo-Julín, who now lives in Philadelphia, concurs that free admission helped Mess Hall reach an audience beyond most keyholders’ art-school circles. One of her favorite events was Tamms Year Ten (<http://www.yearten.org>)’s 2009 critique of the Justseeds (<http://justseeds.org>) artist collective’s Prison Portfolio posters. “It was a packed room, and not everyone was well-versed in the traditional methodology of doing a critique,” Collo-Julín says. “But it turned out to be this really interesting and productive discussion about what propaganda can do.”

Mess Hall is closing because Goldberg wishes to turn the storefront into a center “for Jewish studies and meditation,” his “passion” for almost two decades. According to Borcila, the keyholders don’t have plans to reopen Mess Hall elsewhere. “We are not Mess Hall,” she says. “It’s taken a lot of people to shape this place.” She hopes a two-part workshop, “The Material Production of Cultural Space,” gives supporters ideas about how to start their own initiatives.

“I think it’s sad that it’s leaving,” Collo-Julian says, “but it’s had a full life.”

Mess Hall hosts “The Material Production of Cultural Space” Saturday 23 and Saturday 2.




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