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The ultimate New Rez

Sick of your basement McConnell room? Take a student-guided tour of MIT's swanky new residence hall

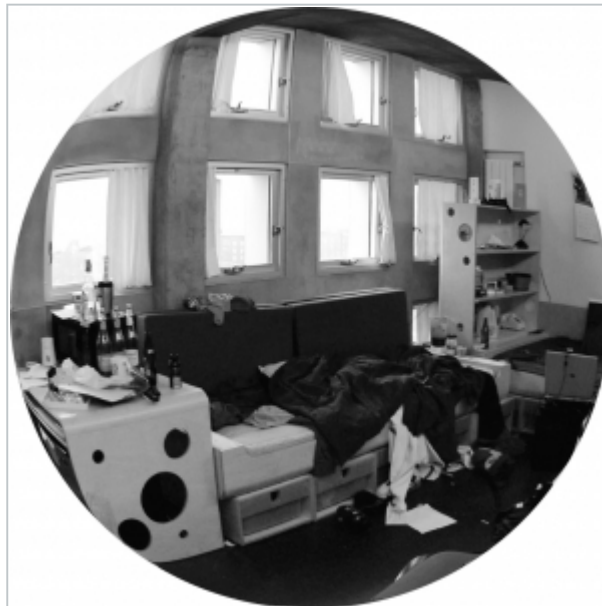
By Caroline Zimmerman
Culture Writer

New Residence is the crown jewel of student housing at McGill. With a sleek lobby and a cafeteria that boasts a menu devoid of mystery meat and overcooked macaroni, the former Renaissance Hotel easily outshines the decrepit buildings of Bishop Mountain Hall.

But New Rez loses much of its lustre when compared with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'s newest experiment in student residence: Simmons Hall. This striking structure, designed by renowned American architect Steven Holl, is the focus of "Inside the Sponge: Students Take on MIT Simmons Hall," the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA)'s most recent exhibit.

Based on the concept of a sponge, Holl's brainchild attempts to reproduce the "porosity" of the marine body on a grand scale. Accordingly, his design includes five imposing openings that serve as main entrances, view corridors, and outdoor activity terraces. Other openings act as the building's "lungs," "bringing natural light in and moving air up." These lungs include spacious common lounges that are specifically designed to encourage human interaction and, according to author Yehuda Safran, transform the building into "a social condenser in the true sense of the term." The building's surface is also saturated with windows, which accentuate the sponge motif.

The CCA's exhibit is unique in its representation of Holl's structure. Though



Simmons Hall undergraduate Student room, MIT, Cambridge MA.

Courtesy of Liang Hong / CCA

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glossy photographs of the building are printed on the museum walls, the CCA does not replicate the pompous, technical depictions presented in architecture magazines, which lavish Holl's award-winning project with praise.

Instead, "Inside the Sponge" presents the residence from an insider's perspective, provoking a somewhat anomalous response: laughter. A slew of student films and folders filled with accounts of pranks, comic strips from MIT's student newspaper The Tech, and pictures of students' favourite hide-outs show visitors that the avant-garde building remains, after all, an undergraduate dorm. And while the materials exposed in the solitary exhibition room – a baffling hodgepodge of binders and Simmons memorabilia – are limited in scope, the CCA offers an accessible gaze at the expensive building of an elite institution: a commendable exercise in demythification.

While critics questioned the conceptual unity of the building, "Inside the Sponge" reveals that students were busy shooting film clips, which ended with tongue-in-cheek equations such as "number of windows in Simmons Hall = 5.538×10^3 = a lot of little curtains." Reflecting on the porosity of the building, a student in a lab coat who presents himself as Prof. Dan says, "Everywhere they can see outside, they can hear outside, but they can't get outside...except through this door." As a commentary on the project's price tag, (a hefty \$120-million, making it the most expensive residence hall ever built in the United States), Prof. Dan directs the viewer's attention to "this amorphous blob of building's ceilings," telling us to observe them carefully as we are, after all, witnessing "several million dollars of ceiling."

The description of student pranks is probably the most entertaining feature of the exhibit. The story of the "hack" who hung a banner onto the roof "adorned with [Simmons Hall's] affectionate nickname 'Waffle House'" is particularly amusing – as is the anecdote about a fleet of yellow rubber duckies' sporadic nocturnal invasion of Dan Graham's Yin Yang art installation pavilion.

Though more benign than the rotten-potatoes-smeared-on-the-common-room-couches prank that was played on my dorm several years ago, these chronicles of daily life at Simmons serve as a refreshing reminder that, despite the swanky building, its inhabitants are mostly math geeks who still think it's funny to draw a bodybuilder on the wall with the caption, "FRANK AND HANS: WE WAS HERE 1/8/03" with a sharpie. It's nice to know that MIT's biochemistry geniuses are smart enough to laugh at themselves.

So, they get customized furniture designed by Steve Holl in their rooms. Big deal. I got orange curtains. And a porn flick left by my room's former occupant in the back of the closet. Maybe their lounge sofas are a tad plushier than those at Molson Hall. But I can't help but chuckle at the idea that chewed gumballs are probably already hardening beneath the couches at Simmons Hall all the same.

"Inside the Sponge: Students Take on MIT Simmons Hall" is at the Canadian Centre for Architecture and runs until November 12. Admission is free until October 15, after which admission will be \$5 for students.