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Sponge Life

Our intrepid reporter ventures into Simmons Hall to find out what it's like to dwell in the Sponge.

By Susan Nasr, SM '06

When Steven Holl set out to design a dormitory that looked like a sponge, he wanted holes. Lots of holes. So huge gaps that double as terraces separate Simmons Hall's three aluminum towers. Volcano-shaped lounges push through the floors. And thousands of two-foot-square windows indent the facade.

The result is an undeniably spongelike edifice, and the \$78.5 million MIT dormitory, named in honor of -Dorothy -Simmons, the late wife and philanthropy partner of -Richard P. Simmons '53, has garnered plenty of attention since it opened in 2002. The most expensive dorm built on campus since Baker House (see "[Of Coffins, Pies, and Armadillos](#)"), Simmons has won multiple architecture awards for its looks, functionality, and energy efficiency. Carlo Ratti, an architect who heads MIT's SENSEable Cities Laboratory, calls it "one of the most talked-about buildings in the architectural community."

But what's it like to live in a work of art? The average single room in Simmons has nine windows, each providing a fractured view of the city--and its own curtain to pull shut at night. "Architects say, 'Oh, that's wonderful. We've got a curtain for every window,'" says Ratti. Talk to students, though, and they'll counter, "I need to spend five minutes every night to close my curtains!" They'll also point out that the windows' screens create a "Faraday cage," a metal box that blocks cell-phone signals. To make their first calls home, some of the 116 freshmen who moved in this fall had to pop out screens.

Dwelling in the Sponge requires--or instills--adaptability.

This year's new students had plenty of reasons for choosing the dorm that's also called the Space Waffle: a love of modern architecture, carpet allergies (it's nearly carpetless), a sense of adventure. "I first heard Simmons described as 'the giant metal thing that looks like it's going to eat the football field,'" says freshman Katrina Ellison. "[But] by the time I got to campus, I was excited about the prospect of living there."

Still, Ellison did a double take when she saw the geometry of her ninth-floor room: a curving wall from the adjacent lounge took up half her floor space. She and her roommate measured the walls to try to "squeeze in a chair or something," she says. Instead, her bed got shoved wall-ward, and Ellison now performs a nightly acrobatics routine to reach it. "I have to crawl into it from the end," she says. "For the first few days, I really hated it."

Other freshmen strove to achieve pleasing configurations of their furniture. The pieces, all designed by Holl, include beds and drawers that stack like Lego bricks--or would, if they weren't too heavy to lift. Movers hired by MIT helped freshmen settle in; eventually an underground trade developed in wrenches to unbolt the furniture.

Senior Aron Zingman doled them out with a warning: "The beds weigh 250 pounds. You can get crushed to death by them." Many freshmen made their first handful of friends while hoisting beds.

Ratti understands that the function of a dorm is more important to most students than its form. So when Simmons housemasters Ellen and John Essigmann asked him to design some functional improvements for the building in 2004, he got the idea to launch a student contest called "Drill a Hole in Simmons Hall." Students' sketches envisioned chalkboards in the hallways and paint for the mono-color walls. The winning design poked outright fun at Holl. It suggested erecting a second Simmons, a "diversional clone," across Vassar Street for admiring architects to tour. In the spirit of the impractical, it called for a cloud-shaped zeppelin to fly over Simmons to shuttle students to class. One contest judge, Canadian Center for Architecture (CCA) director Mirko Zardini, was so impressed with the intelligence (and humor) of the entries that he showcased the design boards in a CCA exhibit on Simmons this fall.

Holes have yet to be drilled in Simmons, but Ratti says the housemasters are serious about making changes. Freshmen say they sometimes feel isolated in a dorm that is--quite literally--more than a football field away from the others. In the tower tops, some residents feel separated from other students in their own dorm. (One tower dweller says she knows her tower mates but often meets other Simmons residents on campus only when "the question of where you live comes up.") Setting aside the contest ideas meant as a joke ("we're not going to fly a big cloud over Simmons Hall," says Ellen Essigmann) and those too expensive to fund from the house budget (such as enclosing the eighth-floor terrace in glass for year-round use), the housemasters are already planning to implement several contest ideas, including making wavy walls into whiteboards and providing little white balls to stick in a large mesh wall to spell out messages.

Jeff Roberts '02, MCP '03, who lived in Baker House and was a student member of Simmons's Founders Group, says that Holl's compartmentalized dorm isn't as good at fostering community as the easy-to-navigate Baker, which held weekly barbecues when Roberts was there. Simmons has no equivalent to Baker's centrally located dining hall, which serves as a hub of dorm social life. Outsiders gossip about the new dorm. "We hear it's cold," says a freshman from McCormick Hall.

As this year's dorm rush chair, Agustya Mehta '08 faced the task of dispelling such rumors. Simmons is friendly, he insists. To prove that to prospective residents during the fall freshman residence exploration period, he held a Star Wars marathon, served late-night waffles, and sent freshmen zipping down a water slide on top of big rubber ducks. After their first week in Simmons, many freshmen who chose the dorm smiled as they called it "quirky," "lighthearted," and "fun."

Anjali Tripathi '09 says that students have enlivened Simmons with the inventiveness celebrated at MIT--and without drilling holes. They successfully campaigned to uphold the practice of adding rubber ducks to Dan Graham's rock, glass, and water sculpture *Yin/Yang Pavilion*. They also converted the photography lab into an electrical--engineering lab and wired the A-tower elevator to play Christmas carols. Ratti marvels at their creative uses of Simmons's holes, where they park bikes or place flowers.

The dining hall may not be conducive to large student gatherings, but Simmons's 341 residents easily organize in cyberspace. An e-mail list known as Sponge-talk is the dorm's lifeline; freshmen look there for help on problem sets and news of free food. Even the word "lounge" has been reinvented: in Simmons, it can mean a cavernous meeting space filled with funky furniture--or a group that uses Sponge-talk and a small, internal rush to recruit enough members to gain house funds for events. The "Jockocracy" lounge watches sports. The "Power Set" studies for the Putnam Competition, a cash-prize math exam.

Of course, these aren't the only opportunities for socializing. Freshmen meet for cereal on the terraces, for cheesecake in the late-night café. On Sunday nights, the basement and first floor fill with sounds of the dorm

orchestra, and graduate students gather underclassmen for snacks and study breaks, which help freshmen--even those in the towers--make friends. Visiting scholars sharing the dorm with students include a resident monk, who has led terrace meditations.

In September, Tripathi, Mehta, grad student Dheera Venkatraman, and others went to work with duct tape and LED lights on some of Simmons's windows. In a midnight Sponge-talk message Tripathi urged residents to go to the football field and look at the building. In letters that spanned two stories, the lit windows spelled "Welcome to Simmons."

By then, even Ellison had warmed to the Sponge. "Although its architecture takes some getting used to," she says, "Simmons is a highly livable dorm."

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