MIT residence is full of holes, but the exhibit is jam-packed

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

It's back to school time at the Canadian Centre for Architecture with its newest exhibition called Inside the Sponge: Students Take on MIT Simmons Hall.

The lighthearted exhibition, a joint presentation between the CCA and Massachusetts Institute of Technology's SENSEable City Laboratory, explores Simmons Hall, an MIT dormitory designed by architect Steven Holl. In keeping with the dormitory tradition, the exhibition colourfully crams quite a number of artifacts and ideas into CCA's small octagonal gallery including T-shirts, wall diagrams, three-ring binders full of study results, photographs, and fun facts, and even a few rubber ducks.

"The concept starts from the sponge and the idea of porosity," said Giovanna Borasi, CCA's curator of contemporary architecture and the project director of the exhibition.

"The boxy, modular-looking Simmons Hall evokes images of our own Habitat 67. But looks are deceptive."

"The building isn't transparent, but the main structure has big cavities to bring in the light and connect the space - like a sponge with big irregular holes," Borasi said. "And the exterior facade plays with the idea of scale. You think every window is a room, but it's not."

In fact, Borasi says that each dorm room has a minimum of nine windows; some have as many as 27 windows.

Borasi adds that the dormitory is used as "a kind of laboratory to understand how the students live."

The studies addressed include the students' residence of origin - colourfully mapped onto the wall by country or state of origin; male to female student ratio - depicted as red or blue fish; and dorm room selection - almost always the seniors chose the front dorm rooms of Simmons Hall, with views of the river and athletic fields instead of the rear rooms with views of industrial building and train tracks.

The students were also asked to suggest design improvements in a contest called Drill a Hole in Simmons Hall. A number of proposals are presented. I particularly liked the idea by Team 10 students Thom Covert, Stephen Form and Coryn Kempster. The trio transformed the exterior of the building into a giant illuminated billboard using the lighted dorm room windows to read: ROOF SOCIAL 10 PM. Now that's the school spirit!

The building, which opened in 2002, was not completed when students began taking up residence. For their protection, students were supplied with a hard hat gift set, comprised of a T-shirt, ear plugs, candy and a red, yellow, blue or green plastic hard hat that they were required to wear. The hard hat gift pack - complete with candy - is displayed.

The students' pranks - called hacks - are fun, too. The most notable of all involved the nighttime infiltration of bright yellow rubber ducks that mysteriously appeared in the lobby's water feature/art installation Yin Yang created by artist Dan Graham. Photos of the prank are displayed and a number of the actual rubber ducks also made the trip. Now in keeping with the carefree student mentality - I'm not suggesting anything here - but wouldn't it be fun if visitors brought there own rubber ducks to the CCA and left them in the gallery...

Inside the Sponge continues until Nov 12.

The Canadian Centre for Architecture is at 1920 Baile St. Hours are Wednesday to Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursday until 9 p.m. Admission costs $10 for adults, $7 for seniors, $5 for students, and $3 for children 6 to 12. Admission is free Thursday evenings from 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Call 514-939-7001 or go to www.cca.qc.ca.
Simmons Hall of Massachusetts, designed by architect Steve Holl.