IDEAS

# How to fix a funny building

## The Harvard Lampoon is based in a mini-castle whose quirks are neatly suited to the world's oldest humor magazine. Now a painstaking 15-year restoration is bringing out more of its architectural genius.

By Renée Loth Contributor, Updated April 27, 2023, 3:00 a.m.

A new fire escape was added as part of the renovations to the historic Harvard Lampoon building. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

In Amsterdam this spring, art lovers are flocking to the Rijksmuseum to see an extraordinary collection of works by the 17th-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer — more portraits and landscapes than the artist himself ever saw in one

place. But you don't have to go to Holland to get a view of Delft. The 1909 Harvard Lampoon building, a droll gem of Flemish lowland architecture, is right here on Bow Street in Cambridge. Withstanding over a century of wear, neglect, and low-level vandalism, the building soon will shed its scaffolding and reveal a full-body makeover.

The Lampoon "castle" — where Harvard undergraduates produce the oldest continuously published humor magazine on the planet — was designed by Edmund March Wheelwright, an unsung master architect of Boston and cofounder of the Lampoon in 1876. Its historic restoration is a passion project of detail and precision that has lasted almost 15 years. But it also provides a rare glimpse under the helmet of the Lampoon itself, whose graduates spawned a revolution in American comedy — and which the rival Harvard Crimson refers to as a "semi-secret social organization which used to occasionally publish a so-called humor magazine." (The envy is wanton.)

Architect Edmund Wheelwright imported 7,000 antique Delft tiles for the Lampoon building. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

In the early part of the last century Wheelwright toured the Netherlands, collecting furnishings and artifacts for the Lampoon building and bringing home 7,000 antique Delft tiles. His friend Isabella Stewart Gardner donated an antique painted sideboard. Wheelwright wanted to reproduce a 16th-century Dutch renaissance castle — but not too faithfully. The building has stepped gables common in the Netherlands, but also Gothic windows and tracery, Spanish ironwork, a Queen Anne-style turret, and notes of English college hall. There's an 8-foot finial topped by a 4-foot copper ibis, the Lampoon's mascot (after the Egyptian deity Thoth, patron of writing and knowledge), and numerous other quirks. "Wheelwright was such a master of his craft that he could keep control and not have it collapse under the weight of his own cleverness," says John Tittmann, partner at Albert Righter Tittmann (ART) Architects, the principal architects for the castle's ongoing restoration.

The Lampoon building in 2008. KREITER, SUZANNE GLOBE STAFF

With its beady-eyed windows and lantern nose, the building is easy to anthropomorphize. Is it a German soldier, complete with metal helmet? Is it a sphinx-like guardian of the revelry — the smashing plates, the dancing on the mantlepiece — happening inside? The building is a kind of 3-D cartoon, nicely fitting the purpose for which it was built.

"The whole building feels like an optical illusion," says author and historian Ted Widmer, who was on the Lampoon staff in the mid-1980s. "The structure isn't parallel, the rooms don't really have walls. Everything about it is irrational."

The narthex, the Lampoon's circular humor library. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

And it's not the only architectural novelty Wheelwright bestowed on Boston. He designed the Longfellow Bridge, with its monumental salt and pepper shakers, and the Pine Street Inn — then the city's fire department headquarters — modeled after the Palazzo Vecchio; a little bit of Florence in the South End. Wheelwright was Boston's official city architect from 1891 to 1895 during the City Beautiful Movement, which held that urban design

should encourage civic pride and engagement. So Wheelwright also endowed the city with several classic beauties, including Horticultural Hall, New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall, the ornate Chestnut Hill pumping station, and more than 40 schools, hospitals, and firehouses.

Inside the Lampoon building are more pranks and perversities, though much of it is off-limits to hoi polloi. A "sanctum room" is designed to look like a Dutch fisherman's cottage; a tiled spiral staircase spins in the wrong direction; a series of brass plates allegedly from the Kremlin and donated by the radical John S. Reed (Lampoon class of 1910) line a mantlepiece; a round room called the narthex is said to be the only dedicated humor library in the country.

Old issues of the Lampoon line the business office. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The building is on the National Register of Historic Places but is not a national landmark, which allows for some alterations. The narthex was redesigned in 1976 by preservationist William Donnell (class of 1967), who joked during a 2012 presentation

at the Massachusetts Historical Society that he had hoped to set the room atop a rotating theatrical turntable. To celebrate the building's centennial in 2009, the artist Michael Frith (class of 1963), who later became creative director for Jim Henson's Muppets, designed a stained glass triptych full of symbols and in-jokes with the Cambridge glass artist Daniel Maher. The ibis is depicted wearing spectacles that contain actual prescription lenses, for example, in memory of Lampoon president George Plimpton (class of 1948), so his spirit could peer through them at Randolph Hall, the dormitory across the street.


Stained glass designed by Lampoon alum Michael Frith, full of inside jokes. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

For a magazine steeped in irreverence, Lampoon alumni speak of the building in near-religious terms. John Updike, president of the Lampoon in 1954, compared first seeing the inside of the castle to "a benevolent and exciting confusion at the gates of Paradise." Decades later, Hollywood producer David Mandel (class of '92) agrees. "There's

something about where the building meets the organization meets the people," Mandel says. A high-voltage creativity and energy that goes "beyond the specific gags . . . that place just bubbles with it. It's like it's baked into the walls." Mandel wrote for the Lampoon in the 1990s and went on to write and produce shows such as "Veep" and the forthcoming HBO series "White House Plumbers."

Writer Kurt Andersen (class of '76), current chair of the Lampoon building committee, says seeing the castle for the first time had "an undying impact." The building, he notes with the wisdom of hindsight, "was a secret insular place and also a parody of a secret insular place." Andersen founded Spy magazine ("a direct descendant" of the Lampoon) and later hosted the National Public Radio show Studio 360.

"I fell in love with it right off," says Robert Neer Sr., who graduated in 1956. "There's a combination of beauty and exoticism . . . it's like a kind of fairyland."

In the mid-1950s, when Neer was treasurer of the financially strapped Lampoon, he and Updike, as president, made the difficult decision to replace the building's leaky, lichen-encrusted roof tiles with more affordable gray slate. "I always felt sad about it," says Neer, now a retired physician who still lives nearby. "It made it look like any other Harvard building and less like a fabulous mistake that had been dropped accidentally into Cambridge."

Today Neer and his son — also named Robert and also a Harvard Lampoon alumnus — are helping to fund the roof's refurbishment with a new set of tiles from the same manufacturer that crafted the first roof. It is among the last steps in the restoration of the castle to be celebrated in a gala event on May 6.

New Spanish clay tiles on the roof. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

The Ludowici tile company is still in business in New Lexington, Ohio, but much else has changed: the clay, the kilns, the firing techniques. More than 110 years ago, kilns heated unevenly, Tittmann says, “like making toast in a bad toaster.” But Wheelwright purposefully chose tiles and bricks that were singed or miscolored to give the Lampoon building a look of antiquity and, as he wrote in a kind of yearbook the Lampoon has kept for a century, “variety and gayety.”

Because there were no good color images of the tiles from the 1950s, Tittmann and associates convened a committee of three Lampoon alumni from the era, including Neer Sr., who consulted diligently on getting the color as close as possible to the original. Replicas of damaged Moravian floor tiles inside the building, donated by the famed ceramicist Henry Chapman Mercer (class of 1879), were soaked in used motor oil to give them the patina of age.


A worker below the iconic dome. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

The exacting attention required to match the floor and roof tiles is only one of the challenges presented by this singular building. The odd pie-slice-shaped piece of land Lampoon members purchased (with $5,000 down) in 1901 widens as it moves east toward Plympton Street, so geometric calculations taken from drone images were needed to fit the tiles correctly, allowing for 14 percent shrinkage of the tiles after being fired. The old mortar used in the brickwork has a higher lime content than contemporary mortar, so it is softer, and today's stronger mortar could cause the old bricks to crack. Cenaxo, the historic building contractors on the project, used a custom recipe to repair the tracery around the castle's windows that had collapsed. "In order to work in an old building you have to use the old techniques," Tittmann says.

In the wake of the deadly fire at the Station nightclub in Rhode Island in 2003, the Lampoon's trustees voted to add a second exit and fire escape to the building. The handcrafted, historically suitable wrought iron work by Hammersmith Studio in West

Concord — complete with ornamental shields displaying “Vanitas,” the Lampoon’s mocking version of the Harvard motto, “Veritas” — won several historic preservation awards. But first the Cambridge historical commission and City Council had to weigh in. Since the building is in the Harvard Square conservation district, the fire escape needed permission from the Cambridge Historic Commission, and because it juts out above a city sidewalk, the Cambridge City Council had to approve what was essentially annexation of the air.


“Vanitas,” a mocking version of Harvard's "Veritas" motto, is spelled out in three parts along a newly installed balcony. JESSICA RINALDI

Since Harvard doesn’t own the building, the benefactors for all this work are mostly Lampoon alumni, some of whom who serve as trustees on a board of 10, and many of whom have had fantastically successful careers. At least $4 million has been raised and spent on the project since 2016, according to the younger Bob Neer, who is treasurer of the nonprofit Harvard Lampoon Trust. Lisa Henson, television and film producer and the first woman president of the Harvard Lampoon, is working on a plan to raise funds by offering tiles designed by Lampoon illustrators with the initials of donors, to be placed in a room off Plympton Street.

For years the Lampoon — an independent student association not supported by Harvard — had struggled financially, and repairs to the building languished. Staff-produced parodies (also known as "travesties") of magazines such as Playboy or Mademoiselle brought in revenue, but it was episodic. Then in 1970, three Lampoon alumni — Henry Beard, Doug Kenney, and Robert Hoffman — spun off the hugely successful National Lampoon magazine, (and its blockbuster films) and royalties for rights to the Lampoon name began flooding in.

A detail of a 16th- or 17th-century Dutch wooden cabinet in the building. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Another lean period followed the National Lampoon's collapse in 1998, but by then a gaggle of alumni — Conan O'Brien, Andy Borowitz, B.J. Novak — had become comedy royalty. Six of the original staff members of "The Simpsons" hailed from the Harvard Lampoon. Others have been writers for "Seinfeld," "Saturday Night Live," and "Curb Your Enthusiasm." Around the time of the building's centennial celebration, in 2009, a

number of former staffers got serious about creating a capital campaign and an endowment. “It’s so much about becoming an adult,” says Mandel.

Although the board is somewhat divided and discussion is just beginning, the trustees are considering opening at least part of the castle for the occasional public tour. The trustees are mindful that the Harvard undergrads don’t want their clubhouse invaded, but a tad more community engagement could help dispel the Lampoon’s heavy whiff of exclusivity. It would be a nice gesture for the magazine’s 150th anniversary, in 2026.

The role of a rude, crude, often lewd humor magazine in today’s contested culture is uncertain. These are times when “reality outruns parody,” says Andersen. “It’s self-satirizing.” Yet the Lampoon survives when so many other college humor publications have sputtered or folded. Does the castle have anything to do with that? “A lot of it was just sitting around trying to make each other laugh,” Andersen says. “That comes easier in a place that is yours.”

A finial in the shape of a jester, below the initials HL, sits atop a newly installed balcony. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Renée Loth's column appears regularly in the Globe.

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