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Admission House Vassar College Poughkeepsie, New York

RESTORING SOME OF THE ORIGINAL ARCHITECTS' IDEAS AND INJECTING SOME OF HER OWN, LINDA YOWELL GIVES NEW LIFE TO A 1908 BUILDING.

by Clifford Pearson

Project: Carol and James Kautz
Admission House, Vassar College,
Poughkeepsie, New York

Architect: Linda M. Yowell, Architect—
Linda Yowell, AIA, principal-in-charge;
Joaquin Ham, Nick Raschella, AIA,
Alfred Wen, Anne Derry Whidden,
project team

Engineers: Robert Silman Associates
(structural); Atkinson Koven Feinberg
Engineers (mechanical/electrical)

Consultants: Judith Stockman (furni-
ture specification); Sasaki Associates
(landscape design)

General Contractor: Kirschhoff
Construction

Adaptive use: Clubhouse to admissions
office

Size: 5,000 square feet, including 800-
square-foot addition

Construction cost: withheld

If you didn't know the building before it was converted to Vassar's Admission House, you would think it had always been this way. Built in 1908 as a clubhouse for maids who worked at the college, then used as offices for the employees' union, this Arts and Crafts structure has now assumed its third identity. Although she redesigned nearly all the interiors and made changes to the exterior, architect Linda Yowell, AIA, was able to capture the spirit of the original architecture.

The new admissions building is the last piece of a program started by Vassar president Frances Fergusson to convert old service buildings in the area behind the school's Main Building. Earlier projects included turning a power plant and a coal bin into two theaters. Fergusson, who is an architectural historian, is continuing to build on campus and has commissioned Hugh Hardy to design a library addition.

Before working on the Carol and James Kautz Admission House, Yowell (a Vassar graduate herself) checked the drawings of the original building by Pilcher and Tachau. She discovered that a series of ceramic tiles specified for the upper portion of the main elevation had never been installed and that a set of cascading front stairs had actually been built as a straight set. So Yowell incorporated the original

architects' ideas into her design, while repairing the building's cracked stucco and wooden eaves and rebuilding the front porch to accommodate a new wheelchair-accessible ramp. To make the new ramp compatible with the Arts and Crafts building, Yowell detailed its railing to match the old porch railing. She also raised the level of the front yard by a foot to reduce the length of the ramp.

On the back of the building, the architect added an 800-square-foot, two-story addition, necessary for the building's new function. By keeping the addition's roof low, Yowell ensured that it didn't obscure the upper band of small windows on the top floor of the existing building.

Reworking the interiors

Because the needs of the admissions department differ from those of a clubhouse, most of the build-

ing's interior spaces have been changed. The basement, which had housed a laundry and boiler, now has offices. And the second floor has been redesigned so it can work as a series of offices around a combined conference and waiting room.

On the main floor, Yowell moved interior partitions to accommodate offices and a secretary's area. Meanwhile, the old lounge was totally refurbished to serve as the waiting room for prospective students and their families. Layers of aging white paint were stripped off the inglenook fireplace to reveal a set of Henry Mercer tiles the same size and shape as the tiles Yowell restored to the building's exterior. Slender wicker furniture was replaced by more solid and comfortable Stickley pieces.

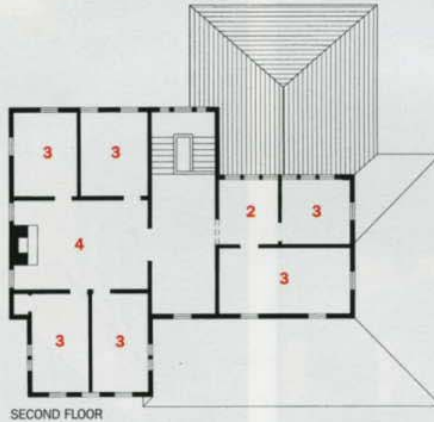
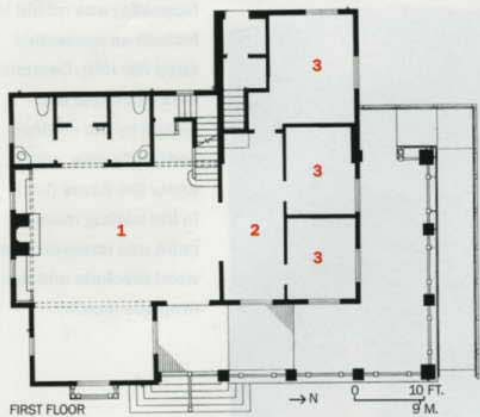
While new interior partitions are gypsum board, the architect restored the old plaster perimeter





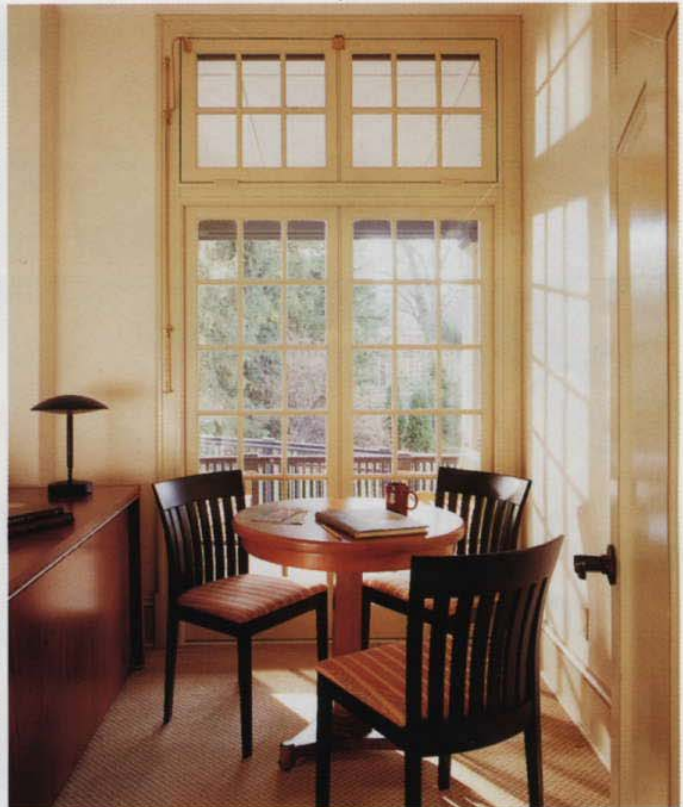
The building's porch (opposite) was rebuilt to include an accessible ramp (far left). Ceramic tiles like those envisioned by the original architects were added under the eaves (left). In the waiting room, paint was removed from wood brackets and the fireplace (below).





- 1. Waiting 3. Office
- 2. Secretary 4. Conference/waiting

The original stairs and plaster walls were restored (below left). Floor plans were totally reworked to accommodate new offices (below right) and waiting rooms on the first and second floors.



walls. "The feeling and sounds you get from plaster walls are completely different," says Yowell. "I wanted to keep that feeling."

For the Admission House project, Yowell tried to understand the intellectual world within which the original architects worked, not just the specific building in question. "I wanted to know what they were thinking and what other architects

were doing at that time," explains Yowell. In so doing, she could then make decisions in the spirit of the old architecture, almost as if she were a turn-of-the-century architect herself.

For example, she added a stenciled border around the top of the walls in the reception room, which she adapted from student artwork on the cover of the 1905

Vassar yearbook. She also selected colors for the exterior of the building that were true to the work of Arts and Crafts architects such as Bernard Maybeck rather than limiting herself to what was on this building.

The building seems to be impressing prospective students and their parents, affecting their views of Vassar. In the first year

after it was completed, admissions applications jumped 18 percent. ■

Sources

- Exterior pottery tiles:** *Pewabic Pottery*
- Fiberglass shingles:** *GAF*
- Wood windows:** *The Woodstone Co.*
- Area rugs in waiting room:** *Stark Carpet*
- Reception furniture:** *Stickley (Audi)*
- Chandelier:** *Brass Light Gallery*