

Dusting off glory at U of C Quad Club

By Steven R. Strahler

New aim: buffing it up to match its storied past

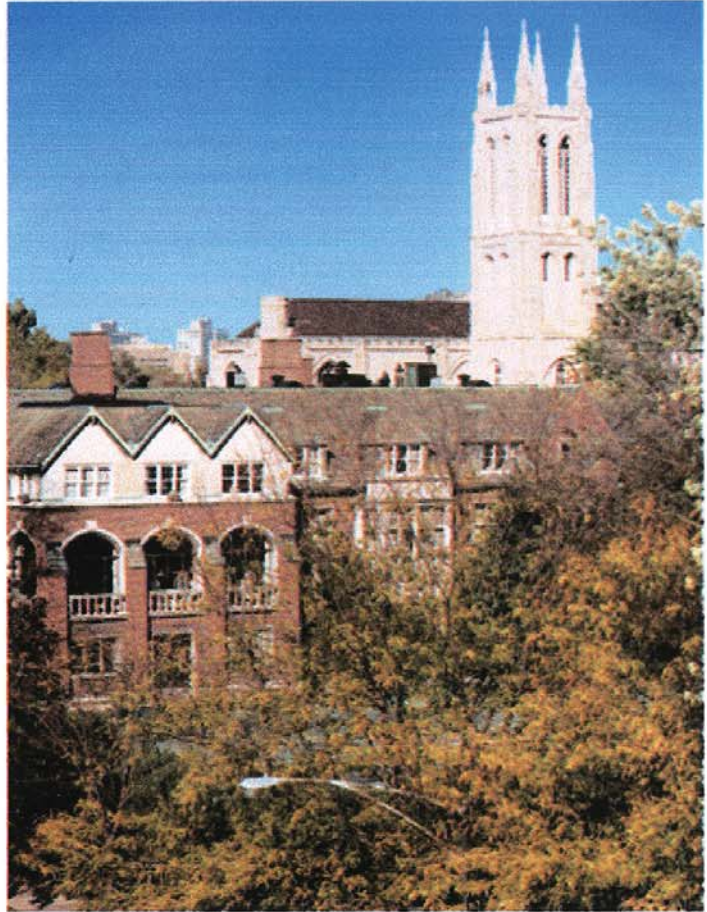
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Nobel laureates have eaten, slept and worked at the Quad Club, but it's in need of a complete restoration and a better way to memorialize its distinguished past, says incoming Chairman Raphael Lee.



Raphael Lee is a plastic surgeon and biomedical engineer at the [University of Chicago](#) who is readying the operating table for his next patient: the Quadrangle Club on the Hyde Park campus. The 85-year-old stone-and-brick structure, modeled after an English country house by society architect Howard Van Doren Shaw, needs more than a cosmetic makeover. The university took control of the club in April and plans a long-overdue restoration, estimated to cost between \$10 million and \$20 million over the next two to five years.

The Quad Club, at 57th Street and University Avenue, isn't just another private dining club suffering from the demise of the three-martini lunch.

Dr. Lee, its incoming chairman, is out to memorialize just how distinctive it is. Enrico Fermi and Leo Szilard discussed the Manhattan Project a block away. Watercolors there were painted by the nation's first Nobel laureate in science, Albert Michelson, who conducted experiments on the speed of light. Today, five Nobel winners are among the 1,000 or so members.

"There are few museums in this country that could put up a more interesting display," says Dr. Lee, 58. "If you walked in there now and walked out, you would have no idea. It really should be a city-recognized monument, given what's gone on here."



Quad Club Chairman David Truitt, left, and successor Raphael Lee in the library.

The club's slate floors are polished to a bright sheen; otherwise, a musty air defines the premises. A preservation ball held annually from 2001 to 2006 raised about \$500,000 before expenses — enough to begin restoration of three of the 17 sleeping rooms that are a legacy of the club's former status as a residential hotel.

"The place had a bad 1970s hairdo — sculpted shag carpeting, rec-room paneling and mod furniture," says Todd Schwebel, a Chicago home and garden designer who has contributed his services to the effort.

A remodeled suite, with period furniture, is dedicated to architect Shaw, who sketched homes for Swifts and Ryersons and designed R. R. Donnelley & Sons Co.'s Lakeside Press and Michigan Avenue's Fourth Presbyterian Church.



Banker Edwin Bakwin contributed \$30,000 to fund a sleeping room named for relative Harold Swift, an alum and former chairman of the board of trustees.

The club can count on community-based fundraising because its membership extends beyond the university — bylaws cap faculty and staff to 65% of the rolls. Some members straddle both worlds. Among luncheon diners spotted one day last week were U.S. Appellate Court Judge Richard Posner and sociologist-author the Rev. Andrew Greeley. Former Alderman Leon Despres, three months shy of his 100th birthday, has been a member for 70 years. "I have to use a kitchen elevator to go to the dining room," he says of the club's limitations.



Architect Howard Van Doren Shaw modeled the building after the English country homes that appealed to his high-society clientele.

The university out of necessity agreed to become the club's sole "sustaining member" despite the burden of another costly reconstruction project within the shadows of a scaffolding-bound Rockefeller Chapel. Annual dues (ranging from \$285 to \$465) barely cover a \$2.2-million operating budget.

"It could scarcely be better located if you're doing business at the university," says philosophy professor and longtime member Ted Cohen. "We need it."

Dr. Lee, who specializes in the treatment of burns and scars, is counting on just that fact. He believes the club will become a natural choice, in the university's heightened efforts to profit from research, for meetings of the minds among scientists, entrepreneurs and venture capitalists.

"That's where the discoveries are really made," he says. "You do the experiment in the lab. But you get the idea in your conversations."





Photos by Erik Unger