A Cabin in the Woods

Tucked in the forest of Banff's Tunnel Mountain is an artist's heaven-on-earth—the Leighton Studios

BY LAURI SEIDLITZ

DON LEE

The Valentine, designed by Calgary architect Fred Valentine, creates a "cathedral" space for writers of music.

Christopher Wiseman, accomplished Calgary poet and author of nine books, explains the problem of writing at home: "At home, there is always something to be done. Phone goes. E-mails ask me for things. Letters arrive. Doorbell rings. Cleaning, tidying. The whole thing."

Who can't relate to that? Add childcare, a "day job," cooking and grocery shopping, and it's a wonder any books get written or paintings painted. Talk about time these days and the general consensus is that we don't have enough time to do the things we must, much less the things we want.

Imagine, then, having an extended period of time in which all the chores in your life are taken care of. You have no distractions. You have privacy, with total control over how much interaction with the "outside" world you get. You have a beautiful, inspiring workspace and you're surrounded by people who respect and understand your needs. Sound good?

For many artists, that is precisely what the Leighton Studios, a working retreat for professional artists, is all about. Part of The Banff Centre for the Arts, the Leighton Studios have, since 1984, provided hundreds of artists

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with a productive and inspiring mixture of privacy, community and sometimes mountain adventure.

Artist retreats have a long and successful tradition in North America. Yaddo, a 400-acre estate in Saratoga Springs, New York, was founded in 1900. The MacDowell Colony was founded in 1907 in Peterborough, New Hampshire. The contribution of these colonies to American artistic achievements is legendary. Leonard Bernstein completed his *Mass* at MacDowell and Thornton Wilder wrote *Our Town* at the colony. Yaddo alumni include James Baldwin, Truman Capote, Sylvia Plath and Mario Puzo. Colonists from both retreats have won Pulitzer Prizes, National Book Awards and dozens of other honours.

In the early 1970s, David Leighton, director of The Banff Centre (then called the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts), and Neil Armstrong, manager of fine arts, had a vision of creating an artist retreat at The Banff Centre on the model of Yaddo and MacDowell. After visiting the American colonies in the late 1970s, Leighton and

Armstrong were ready to make their vision a reality. With a generous gift from the Kahanoff Foundation of Calgary and matching funds from the Alberta government, the concept for the studios began to take shape.

The retreat was to offer artists uninterrupted working time; ideal, comfortable working conditions; and, if desired, stimulating interaction with fellow artists. Residents were to be free to take advantage of the creative community of The Banff Centre as a whole, including performances, exhibitions and technical expertise from departments and staff whenever possible. Living routines were to be tended by others so that all the artists' energy could be devoted to their work. Like Yaddo and MacDowell, the retreat's mission would be to support creative excellence in artists of all backgrounds.

The Hemingway, a studio for writers, is influenced by Haida architecture.

Architects from across Canada were asked to design a perfect working space for practitioners of each of three art forms. The eight studios were to provide maximum privacy, blend with the surrounding environment and take advantage of the spectacular scenery. Bob Whitney, then plant maintenance foreman at The Banff Centre, comments that the multi-architect approach makes the studio site unique. "You'll probably never see anything like them anywhere," Whitney says. "They weren't just little boxes plopped there."

Artists do not live in the studios—they use them as office space, sleeping elsewhere. Writing studios provide

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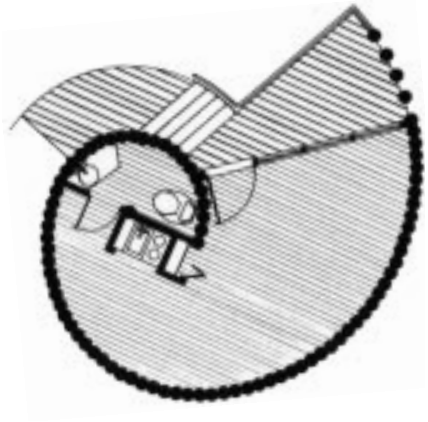
Designed by Ottawa architect Douglas Cardinal, the Cardinal Studio offers composers a bright, roomy work area transitioning to an intimate rest area at the core of the spiralling shape.

plenty of desk space. Music studios are equipped with baby grand pianos. Visual Arts studios offer open, flexible spaces and the best possible use of light. Furnishings are minimal, but each studio has a toilet and small kitchen area for snacks.

Construction took place during 1983 and 1984. To maintain seclusion, the site was to be kept as natural as possible, so no trees were to be removed or damaged during construction. This meant materials had to be carried in by hand or wheelbarrow. Bob Whitney recalls that even the foundations had to be dug by hand: "It's not solid rock, but there's lots of glacier rock that had to be pick-and-shovelled out."

The most dramatic event during construction was undoubtedly the installation of the Henriquez studio, now known affectionately as "The Boat." Once a working vessel on the west coast, the 10-metre Elsie K was towed to Banff by truck and moved into place by crane. It was then outfitted with desk space and enough amenities to make it a compact but functional writer's studio.

At first the studios were equipped with water tanks and humus toilets to avoid digging up the ground to install



facilities. However, the tanks quickly became disruptive to the retreat environment since they had to be regularly refilled by bobcats rolling through the site. But it was the humus toilets that really caused a problem. Whitney reports that humus facilities are "sensitive. They need a proper balance of moisture and time between uses." Without this balance, some of them began to smell. One dried out and started on fire when a cigarette butt was carelessly flicked in. After the fire, there was no question: humus had to go. By 1988, water and sewage facilities were in place.

Artists may apply for residency year round and are selected by jury. Alexandria Patience, coordinator of the Leighton Studios, explains that although sometimes applications by emerging artists are accepted, in general it is more established artists who get the most benefit from a retreat. She explains, "beginners often need more than themselves to draw from. They benefit from being with peers, having feedback, that kind of thing."

Melinda Hunt, a visual artist who grew up in Calgary and has lived and worked in New York since 1988, affirms that the younger artist generally "isn't ready for a month away. They need the buzz, their peers, more action to get them going."

Hunt's first residency at the Leighton Studios was in 1997. She now tries to come every summer, staying two to three weeks at a stretch. Of her time there, she says, "it gives me a chance to organize my whole year. The uninterrupted time allows me to really think and focus on direction. And I don't have to run to the grocery store by five o'clock."

Over the years, more than 700 artists have visited the studios, many returning regularly. Yolanda Van Dyck, a visual artist based in Calgary, has worked in the studios almost every year since they opened. She says she gets five times the amount of work done there as she does in the city. Christopher Wiseman is another regular. He has been to the studios at least once every year since 1986.

Wiseman describes the impact of the studios on his work: "In the past 11 years, I have done at least 70 to 80 per cent of my writing in the Leighton Studios. By 'writing,' I mean first drafts. I can't write at a regular time each day at home, yet I can in the studios. I can revise at home or anywhere, but for me the creation of the first draft is the hard part of writing, and that I now reserve more and more for Banff, where it pours out at

incredible speed." He adds, "I think I must have spent over a year of my life in the studios and most of it in the Evamy, which is by far my favourite."

Artist applications are vetted without regard to nationality or financial means, in the tradition of other artist retreats. Priority is given to new applicants over artists who have been there before. Given the cost of transportation, however, it is not surprising that the majority of Leighton artists have been from Canada and that a significant proportion of those have been from Alberta. Approximately 65 per cent of Leighton alumni are Canadian, and of these, 30 per cent are Albertan.

International artists have come from the United States, Argentina, Australia, Chile, Cuba, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, the Republic of China, Sweden, Taiwan and the United Kingdom. The number of international visitors has increased in recent years due to partnerships The Banff Centre has forged with arts organizations in Mexico, Argentina and Ireland. Agreements with other countries are in the works.

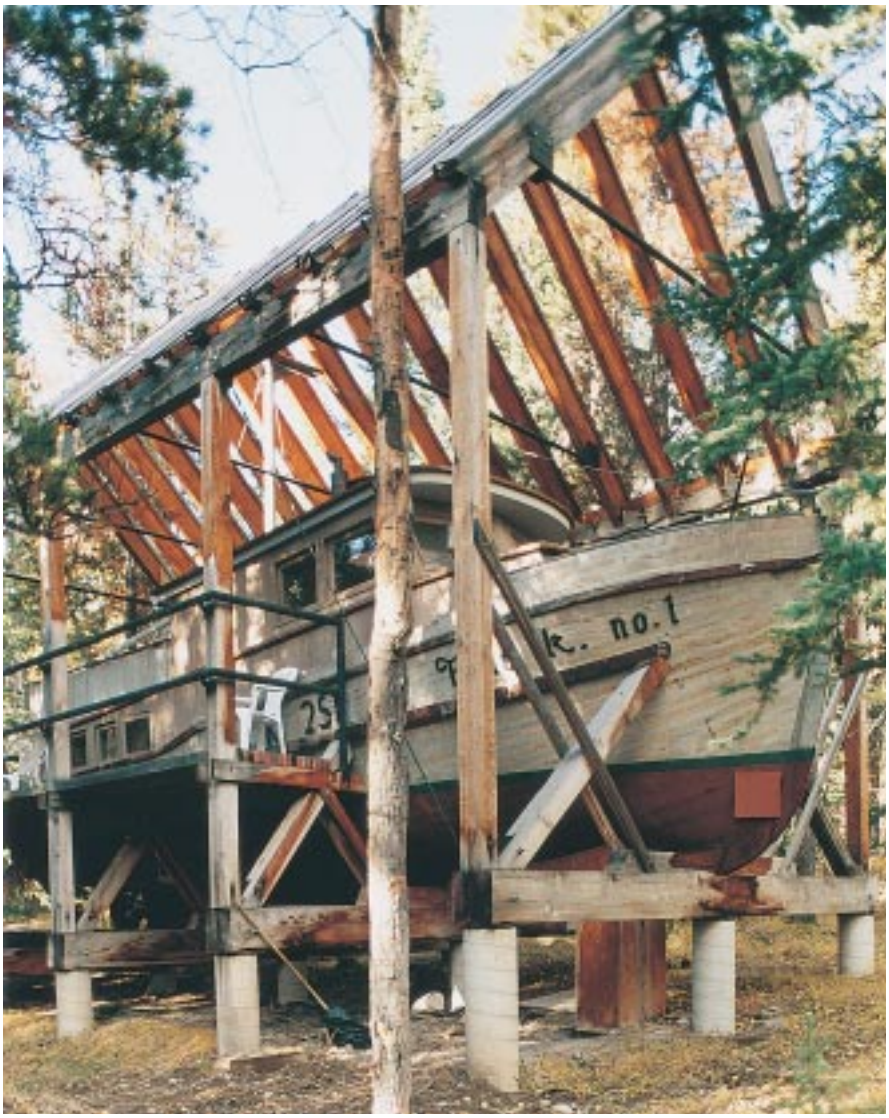
The Leighton Studios have operated for just over 15 years, places like Yaddo for over 100. Still, it is fair to ask whether the studios are fulfilling their original mandate: are they supporting the work of artists who demonstrate excellence in their fields?

A quick peek at the list of Canadian alumni alone is impressive. Many are among this country's creative elite. Writers Robertson Davies, Dorothy Livesay, Karen Connelly and Jan Zwicky have all won Governor General's awards. Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* won last year's prestigious Trillium Award and was shortlisted for many other honours. Recording artist Jann Arden's work has reached the top of popular music charts and she's taken home more than one Juno award. Composer Alexina Louie is a Juno winner herself and has had compositions selected for performances as diverse as the opening of Expo '86 in Vancouver and a concert for the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

One artist was trapped in a studio for a day and night by a calving elk outside her door

From the dance world, choreographer and founder of Toronto Dance Theatre Christopher House has spent time at the Leighton studios, as has aboriginal choreographer Margo Kane. Award-winning theatre professionals include playwrights Joan MacLeod and Sally Clark, as well as directors Aiyyana Maracle and Jillian Keiley, each a recipient of the John Hirsch Prize for emerging directors with great potential and an exciting artistic vision.

One of last year's star residents was Larry Weinstein, a partner in Rhombus Media, which is responsible for such internationally acclaimed



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Vancouver's Richard Henriquez refitted an old 30m boat from B.C. to fulfill the functional needs of writers.

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Vancouver architect Ian Davidson designed his pyramid-roofed studio for maximum visual and acoustic privacy.

films as *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* and *The Red Violin*. Weinstein used his studio time to plan a performance special on composer Harold Arlen and a feature film about composer Arturo Toscanini.

Sometimes a direct connection can be drawn between work in the studios and an artist's later achievements. Diana McIntosh, a Manitoba composer, had several short residencies last year to work exclusively on an orchestral work commissioned by the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. The finished piece, accompanied by narration about the Joyce Milgaard story, premiered last January in the WSO's Centara New Music Festival. It received a standing ovation from an audience of more than 2,000.

If the artists' work receives standing ovations, so does the experience of staying in the studios. Ask artists about their residence and the reviews are outstanding.

"Some days I worked 18 hours and was disappointed when hunger forced me to break for a meal," says Weinstein. "I started to hoard supplies in my studio so I could avoid leaving!" He extended his stay by a few days because he found it so productive. Diana McIntosh asserts that "it provides me with the most productive atmosphere in exquisite beauty, a fully functional facility and an intelligent, understanding staff that is always willing to help in any way possible."

While some revel in the privacy the studios provide, other artists look forward to interactions with their peers in the more social atmosphere of the common dining hall and through occasional organized events for studio residents. Patience describes the atmosphere of the studios as a "drop-in community of artists who are actively engaged—they're really 'on.' Yet residents can choose to close their door. Their first responsibility is to their work."

Yolanda Van Dyck lists this opportunity to meet and engage with "a very high level of artist" as a feature that has helped her and other artists over the years. Melinda Hunt says she was surprised about this aspect of the retreat. She explains that "at first I thought it was about isolation." Hunt says she's formed many lasting friendships with other artists though introductions in Banff.

She laughs, "Fred Hersh [a jazz composer/pianist] lives on the same street as me in New York, but we can't seem to get together. He finally suggested that we get together in Banff this summer to get caught up!"

Some people get more isolation than they planned. One artist from New York came down with tuberculosis and was quarantined in her studio. "People would deliver food a few times a day and run away!" Van Dyck remembers, laughing. Another artist was trapped in a studio for a day and night by a calving elk outside her door. Park wardens didn't want to disturb the elk until the calf was born.

Van Dyck has had many experi-

ences with the local wildlife over the years. Upon returning to her studio one afternoon to continue painting, she found her "still life" on the deck with bites taken out of it. On another occasion, she swears she saw squirrels using a studio's slanted windows as a ski hill.

Luckily for Van Dyck, after the "fire in the toilet" incident, each of the studios had been equipped with a telephone. One night she called the front desk at 10:00 to report a bear on her porch. Years later, the "bear on the porch" story has assumed the status of legend at The Banff Centre. Some versions insist the bear was eating artwork left on the porch and others that he was reading some writer's first draft in one of the deck chairs. In any event, the claw marks on the tree outside the Thom studio mark the truth of the tale.

Most recently, a cougar took down an elk near one of the studios and lay guarding it. Artists were cautioned to stay in their studios until the cat could be frightened away and the elk removed.

Occasional adventures with local wildlife aside, work doesn't always go smoothly. Carol Holmes, manager overseeing the studios, notes that "the studios provide an awful lot of time that you can use productively—or it can drive you mad."

A few artists are stymied during their stay for one reason or another. Myra Ferguson, who once administered the studios, recalls a composer from Australia who stayed for three months and couldn't seem to work. She remembers: "He had every excuse under the sun for not working—the toilets, the water, the squirrels, the trees swaying outside his windows." Van Dyck offers advice for prospective residents: "Don't go in cold." In other words, when you get to the studio, be working on something. Don't expect to get started during your stay there.

A more serious concern involves money. When the studios were first built, The Banff Centre searched for an endowment to fund the program so that artist residencies could be financed as they are at Yaddo and MacDowell. Both American colonies have a "pay what you can" system in place, as indeed the Leighton Studios had for several years after opening.

The endowment search was ultimately unsuccessful and, as money available for scholarships eroded over time, a fee was finally implemented. It currently costs $50 per day for the studio and around $63 per day for room and board to stay at the Centre. For even a two-week stay, the costs add up.

Some insist the bear was reading some writer's first draft in one of the deck chairs

The Banff Centre can discount the studio fee for artists in financial need, but can't do anything about the cost of room and board. Funding agencies often support an artist's residency, but artists who are unsuccessful at securing outside funding sometimes cannot afford the program. The registrar reports that artists who cancel their stay after being accepted most often give financial reasons. Others, faced with the fees, may not apply at all.

Wiseman worries about this problem—he recalls a time when he could pay $20 a day for studio, room and three meals a day. He explains: "The isolation, the solitude, the studio itself have all been so important to my writing for 15 years. I'm really sorry it has become so expensive that I'm spending only about half the time now that I'd like to spend in Banff and worry, quite seriously, whether I'll be able to manage to go at all in the future. I really don't know what would become of my first-draft writing if that were to happen. It doesn't bear thinking about."

Patience acknowledges the problem, but says it's unlikely to go away. "I think it's the way of arts funding in Canada these days. It's far easier to find start-up money for a new project than it is to find operating funds for an existing program."

As for other challenges facing the studios, Patience mentions the need to protect the environment around the studios. Over the years the trees surrounding the buildings have aged and lost many of their lower branches, exposing the once-secluded site to traffic noise and curious eyes. "Perhaps we'll build some kind of natural sound barrier. Or plant more trees. I don't know specifics, but I know the need to do something is growing." In the meantime, she hopes the "No Trespassing" signs will discourage uninvited visitors, except perhaps art lovers of the furry kind.

Since their inception, the studios have undergone many changes: toilets, telephones and, in 2000, computers with high speed Internet access. This last modification, in particular, reflects the busy, multi-tasking, always-electronically connected nature of current lifestyles. Nowadays, even artists at an isolated mountain retreat need to check their e-mail once in a while.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these time-squeezing lifestyle changes, the time and space provided by the Leighton Studios remain important for artistic advancement. The challenge for the future isn't in keeping the program relevant for artists' needs. As Wiseman says plainly: "It is still the finest place to go and write that I know about." The challenge is in protecting the original vision for the studios in the face of environmental and financial pressures.

Lauri Seidlitz is a freelance editor and writer. She has been managing editor of the Banff Centre Press since 1998.