Yaddo Artists’ Colony, Host to Capote, Arendt, Foster Wallace, Looks to the Future

The original Yaddo mansion—shown here at the turn of the century—was used as a summertime retreat for the Trask family.

*Photo courtesy Library of Congress*
Yaddo, an arts colony that for nearly a century has nurtured some of the country’s most acclaimed writers, including Truman Capote, Sylvia Plath and Patricia Highsmith, is turning over a new leaf at its upstate New York campus.

Guided by a master plan from Ennead and equipped with new live-work studios by Phinney Design Group, the Saratoga Springs nonprofit has begun the first phase of a $20 million, multi-decade project—its first major renovation since 1926, when the colony opened.

The goal is to preserve, restore and update the 400-acre property, which was declared a National Historic Landmark in 2013, without sapping its rustic charms, according to Elaina Richardson, Yaddo’s president.

“You don’t want somebody who’s working here to be thinking about trim color and the tile in the bathrooms,” Richardson says. Simultaneously, she adds, “the core promise of good working conditions demands that you have good temperature control, good natural light and the sense of things being sturdy.”

The renovation’s first major step involves adding five live-work studios, which Phinney, a local firm, designed with the help of LA Group, a Saratoga landscape firm. To be completed in April, the 1,000-square-foot studios, which are stick-built of local poplar and Douglas fir, feature sloped roofs, deep eaves, and outdoor porches.

Most of the cabins will be positioned to overlook the property’s ponds and all, following Ennead’s suggestion, will be sited away from Interstate 87, whose roar is audible on the conifer-lined campus. As the new studios—for writing, painting, and music composition—are completed, two rundown 1920s-era studios will be removed, Richardson said, with others to follow.

The first phase, which is budgeted at $7.5 million, also calls for upgrading the heating systems in the sprawling stone-walled 1893 mansion that’s the centerpiece of campus. Designed by William Halsey Wood, the neo-Gothic 45,000-square-foot structure, which has coffered ceilings, huge fireplaces, and stained-glass windows, was originally used by the Trask family as a summer retreat.
The plan by Ennead, which was chosen from five finalists in 2014 after a request for proposals was issued, is not expected to be completed till 2040. But ultimately, it calls for converting grounds-crew garages into visual-arts studios, constructing a new president’s house, and relocating a popular swimming pool.

Last year, 220 artists, most of them writers, attended Yaddo, which accepts only a handful of applicants for its free residencies. Over the decades, Yaddo’s alums have collectively won 71 Pulitzer prizes, 68 National Book Awards, and one Nobel prize, in 1976, to Saul Bellow.

Tomas Rossant, a design partner at Ennead, which focuses almost exclusively on projects for nonprofits, says he jumped at the chance to serve an artists’ community, a group that typically doesn’t have many moments to “share the anguish and beauty and privilege of being a creative with others.”

Yaddo, Rossant says, “is a machine to produce culture of the highest order.”

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