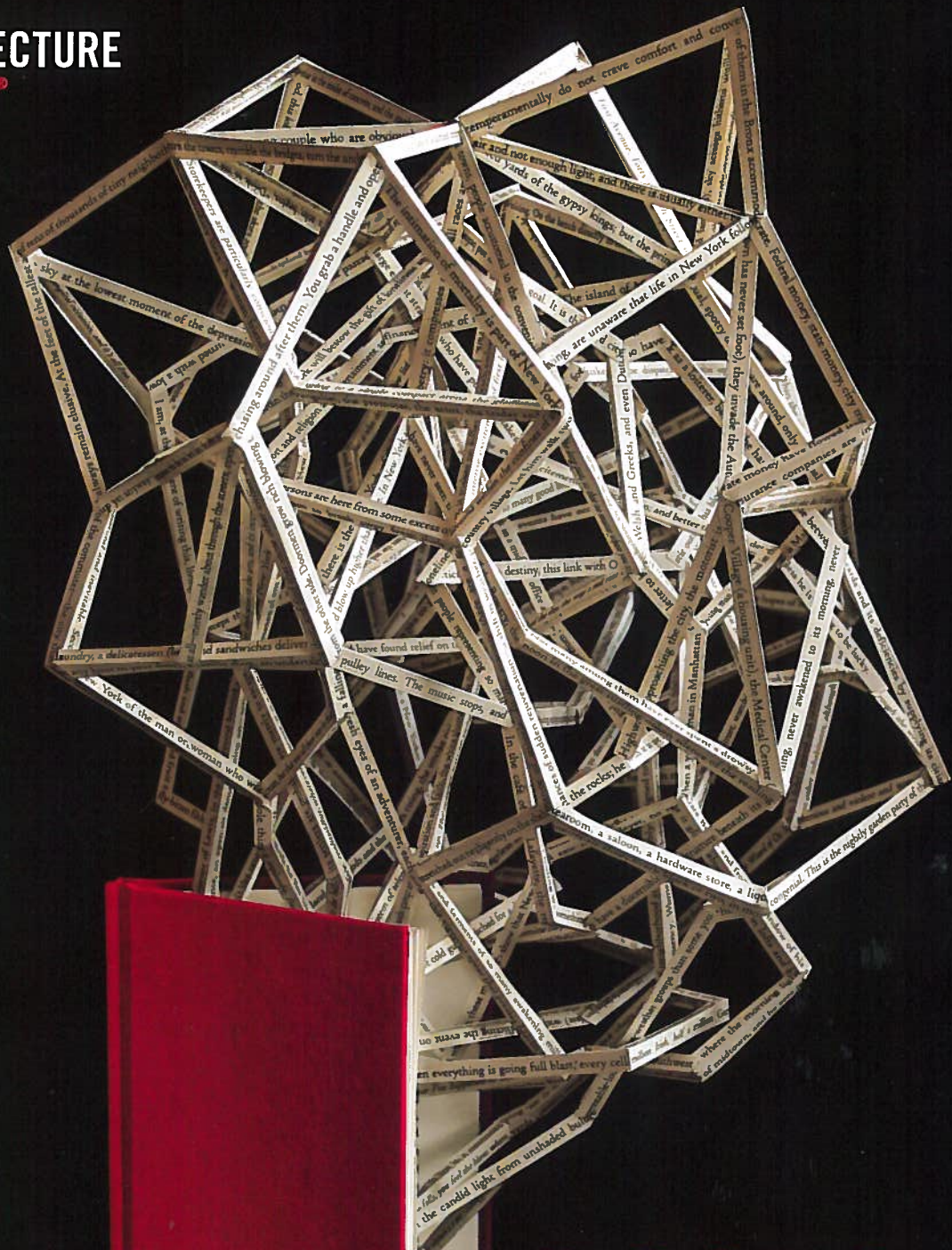


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A NOTE ON THE TYPE
READING ROOMS



BOOKS



INTO THE WOODS

by David Macy

In 1907, the MacDowell Colony was founded to offer artists time and space to create. Today, 32 studios are scattered across hundreds of acres, each well lit and simply appointed to suit various modes of creativity. Nestled in the woods or on the edge of a meadow, the studios, whether half-timbered or built of fieldstone, are organic architectural products resulting from a century of trying to create the ideal workspace.

The only adornments on studio walls are rows of pine tablets, some age-darkened beyond legibility, filled with handwritten names of those who've previously animated the space. Leonard Bernstein said that in winter the studio quiet was so complete that he could discern the sound of snow falling from upper branches of the white pines onto those below. While writing *The Skin of our Teeth*, Thornton Wilder stepped out of his MacDowell studio to find diligent ants constructing a new anthill, a sight that brought tears to his eyes. The structural autonomy provided to the artists—and the three meals a day—afford freedom to observe and refine praxis, to seek a natural rhythm.

Poets', novelists', and playwrights' studios include two desks and cork walls for storyboarding. Composers are offered a baby grand piano. Interdisciplinary artists, filmmakers, and animators can request blackout capability. Visual arts studios—also used by architects and interdisciplinary artists—have high ceilings, northern light, and generous wall space. A few studios are specialized, providing essential tools for photographers, printmakers, and sculptors. And if enclosed space constricts, most studios include a screened porch, a daybed, and a chair: places to read.

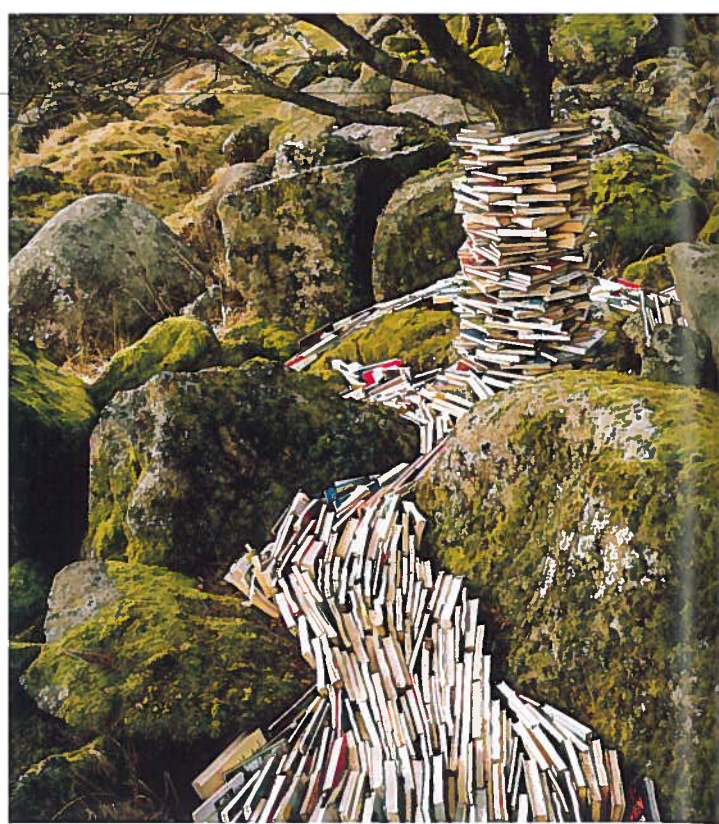
Artists often ship their books in advance of arrival, planting a flag before taking up residence. A fellowship of less than eight weeks focuses the mind: how to prioritize creative work, research, and participation in the community. Looking at many artists' experience collectively, a typical arc describes the use of time and space:

DAY ONE

Thrill of validation (Willa Cather wrote at this desk!) tinged with fear of failure-to-launch.

Wary first-dinner interactions at Colony Hall; protective veneer in place regarding self and intended project, possibly related to fear of failure.

Retire to bed soon after dinner to finish the book begun in transit, bedroom door bolted and lights burning against the rural darkness.



DAY SEVEN

Anxiety set aside as surprising volume of new and exciting work mounts in the studio (or, minimally, a contact high drawn from peers' after-dinner presentations).

Raucous dinner conversations and meetings of minds in the library.

Creative studio work in overdrive; reading mostly confined to lunch (soup-stained pages a small price to pay).

DAY FOURTEEN DNWARD

Vulnerability becomes a friend in the studio during seemingly endless workdays.

Appearing as if by magic, new friends and books provide insights that are plowed directly into the work. Nightstand crowded with books recommended or written by dinner companions; unhelpful books and people set aside without regret.

LAST THREE DAYS

New topic creeps into conversations with brand-new/age-old friends: How to connect post-MacDowell? Books already boxed. (Note to self: Borrow packing tape from front office.)

MacDowell concentrates two circumstances that are increasingly scarce in contemporary life: a banishment of distractions and a manifest respect for artists in the act of making. Though the woodland silence surrounding the studios is perfectly suited for reading deeply, there is too much work to be done when you finally hear yourself think. ■

DAVID MACY is resident director of The MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where for 20 years he has worked with artists, architects, builders, and board members to improve the quality of the residency program. *

ABOVE

It's common knowledge, by Rune Guneriusson, 2009.