

# Haystack crafts school on Deer Isle featured among architectural elites

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By Johnny Liesman

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On the snowy New Year's Eve of 1984, Portland-based artist Lissa Hunter climbed over a large metal chain blocking the entrance to the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and continued on foot down the snow-covered road.

An art student at Indiana University, Hunter had heard for years about the summer crafts school and the magical labyrinth of wooden cabins and art studios that sit quietly among the trees on Deer Isle and look over the other islands of Jericho Bay. The place had a lure that rippled through the art world, and one chain indicating that the school was closed for the winter wasn't going to keep Hunter away.

“There are so many buildings in the world that you go to, like the Lincoln Memorial, or the Taj Mahal, and you think these buildings are saying, ‘Look at me, I am important,’” Hunter said. “And then you go to Haystack and you think, this building is saying no, *you* are important.”

Designed by American architect Edward Larrabee Barnes in 1959, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts is the type of place that leaves a deep impression on first visit.



The view from the loft of a sleeping cabin at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle on May 19, 2017. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

And today, 60 years after it was first erected, Haystack has been recognized by The New York Times as one of the 25 most significant works of postwar architecture in the world.

“To see Haystack on that list and to be in the company that we were in just felt like such an honor,” executive director Paul Sacaridiz said. “It really reaffirmed our own belief in how important and special this place is.”

The list of 25 architectural works spans six continents (and space, thanks to the International Space Station) and includes remarkable buildings such as the 38-story Seagram Building in New York City, the Sydney Opera House, and Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers’ Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Compiled for The New York Times Style Magazine by a small group of renowned architects, designers and writers, the works signify “architecture that they felt had not only reshaped the world and era in which it was introduced but also has endured and remains influential today.”

But scrolling through the list, the picture of Haystack’s cedar-shingled front office immediately stands out among the other more prominent and extravagant buildings.



Cabins at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. *Photo courtesy of Dan Rajter*

The small, sleek cabin-style buildings and studios, all connected by a network of wooden platforms raised on pilings, allow for the entire campus to float above the forest floor and blend into its surroundings. Compared with the other 24 buildings on the list, Haystack doesn’t ask to be noticed.

“For me, this building is all about the sense of modesty, the understated quality of design, and really the kind of conviction and belief that extraordinary things can happen through simple means and gestures,” Sacaridiz said.

Since its creation, Haystack has been recognized as a remarkable piece of architecture, embracing the vernacular style of New England and its natural surroundings while adding a simply stated modern elegance.

In 1994, it was awarded the 25-year award from the American Institute of Architects, joining only 49 other buildings, including the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. Later in 2006, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

The recognition by The New York Times is just the latest achievement for Haystack and world-renowned architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, who passed away in 2004 and is well-known for designing numerous buildings, including the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the IBM headquarters in New York City.

Throughout all of the buildings Barnes designed in his long career, though, he described Haystack as “one of the happiest jobs of my career.”



The Haystack Mountain School of Crafts' ceramics studio *Photo courtesy of Audi Culver*

The design of Haystack – including the community of buildings that form a unique village-like feeling, its location situated on a granite ledge, and the style of the main staircase leading to the water – was all inspired by a trip Barnes took to Greece shortly before beginning the Haystack project.

“He saw these Greek fishing villages all made of one material, and how they went down to the water’s edge, so he really envisioned Haystack in that way, cascading down the granite ledge,” said Stuart Kestenbaum, former director of Haystack from 1988 to 2015.

One of the greatest challenges of his career as director, Kestenbaum said, was the responsibility of maintaining the original design and intent that Barnes had envisioned. Before making any noticeable changes, the school would always consult with Barnes, an unusual gesture that Kestenbaum said Barnes was incredibly grateful for.

“I was always aware that we were stewards of a remarkable campus that was integral to what we did because it connected people so well together,” Kestenbaum said. “To me, the message here is that a building doesn’t have to be big to be important, or expensive to be recognized. It can have a profound significance by being humble and just doing the right thing.”

Haystack Mountain School of Crafts was first founded in 1950 by a group of artists supported by patron Mary Beasom Bishop. It was originally located on the slopes of Haystack Mountain, just inland from the coast. Highway construction later forced the artists to find a new location.

Perched atop a granite ledge on Deer Isle starting in 1961, the crafts school quickly became a prominent and unique destination for artists around the world. Since then, scores of artists, from students seeking practice in textiles or ceramics to famous artists such as textile designer Anni Albers, glass blower Dale Chihuly, and ceramist and painter Toshiko Takaezu, have all visited Haystack.



With pitched roofs and large windows, the sleeping cabins at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts are bright and airy. 2017 photo by Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer

Sacaridiz attributes the success of Haystack as an arts institution to the non-hierarchical structure of the community. Without a core student body or staff, degrees or certificates, the school is constantly reinventing itself.

“Haystack has played a really important role in how craft has been understood and practiced here in the United States,” Sacaridiz said. “I think it’s very unusual for a place to be this nimble, and able to change in response to what we see happening in the world.”

But the influence of Haystack on the arts and crafts world cannot be discussed without mentioning how its architectural design has inspired creativity and community among visiting artists and students.

Haystack, The New York Times writes, “is not just an elegant set of buildings but an ideal space for collaboration: between artists and thinkers, humans and nature.”

“You learn so much more than the workshop you’re taking, and it comes from being in a community that supports you,” said Hunter, who has served two terms on the Haystack board of directors and is now a lifetime trustee. “The school was designed with a small-town Main Street idea. And everybody gets to meet everybody on Main Street.”

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