

IN THE STUDIO: A PLACE OF HER OWN

Catherine Eaton Skinner's loft combines functionality with the raw beauty of a historical warehouse space

WRITTEN BY JENNA VANDENBERG



Catherine Eaton Skinner understands sacred spaces.

She has been investigating how people mark spiritual places and the variances around the world. Her journals document travels in Myanmar, India, Bhutan and Africa, observing how people of countless generations have reverently designated time and place as theirs. She and her husband reside in special places: Seattle (they are both native Northwesterners) and Santa Fe, a place they discovered while honeymooning

So it only makes sense that her studio is her own sacred space. When discussing her spirituality, Skinner points back to her studio and work. "This is where I am six days a week, my study is here." And from her meeting space, walled with windows and bookshelves, to the kitchenette where paintings incorporating her mother's handwritten notes are displayed, the studio itself is a showcase of how Skinner marks her own space as sacred.

Her 88-by-44-foot loft, formerly a wholesale distribution center for shoe parts, is located in a 1910 building on Seattle's Capitol Hill. Working with Tom Kundig of Olson Kundig Architects, the old warehouse was transformed into her studio, functioning also as a place to meet friends and colleagues, host nonprofit functions, sponsor visits from high school art students and store decades worth of photographs, paintings and supplies.

Kundig, who has often transformed old industrial spaces, speaks of the desire he and Skinner shared to preserve the history of the building. "As much as possible I'm going to

s history. So the vision was really, how much of this
ful existing spirit of this building can I keep?" So the
wood posts, massive beams and laminate wood car
were exposed and sandblasted. The old wood floors
ply cleaned and finished, leaving spots of discolor-
d scratch marks as historical reference points.

eleven months
g, designing and
g, the former fac-
transformed into
studio. While
beauty to marvel
he functionality
ce is an equally

story. The back painting wall has a peg system
y Skinner, so she is able to easily support and
ls as she works. There are four glass-topped
oles on wheels that can be pushed together for
cts. Six wall panels on tracks rotate and slide to
ant flexibility in the studio. Walls can be moved
work, close off storage space during functions,

control light for photographic work or simply divide up the
room. Steel and wood custom-made bookshelves line the sit-
ting area where Skinner meets family, friends and colleagues
before heading out to dinner or delving into a project or
discussion. Custom steel stairs lead to a rooftop patio with
fenced-in space for her Jack Russell terriers to run. Of course

there is also space for all the
necessities of both life and
art: deep sinks, computers
and printers, a dishwasher
and shower.

One practicality that
was especially important for
Skinner was a long table.

Aesthetics were important. "If you do something beautiful,
it solves two or three problems simultaneously," Kundig
says, as he relates the story of Skinner tracking down an
old-growth round of Douglas fir, reclaimed after the Mt. St.
Helens eruption. The rough-sawn 26-foot plank was lifted
into the studio by crane one Sunday after the wood-frame
windows had been removed (later to be replaced by indus-

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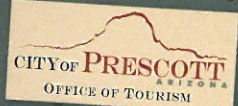
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trial steel casements manufactured in New York). Once inside, the table was finished and fitted with what Kundig dubbed "Fred Flintstone wheels," fabricated locally by 12th Avenue Iron. Like all things in the studio, the table glides from one area to the next as needed. Lately the surface has been covered with prints for Skinner's upcoming book. It has also been used for organizing series of paintings, planning shows and is often set for dinner for 32.

Beyond the beauty of the building with its view of the Space Needle and the ease of working in a custom-made studio, Skinner speaks to a more general need to simply have a place of her own. "It's really important to have your own space, especially for mothers with children and husbands and jobs. ... It doesn't have to be very big, but it's a space that is just yours." She remembers her earliest days as an illustrator, working in a cleaned-out tool shed, rented storage space and a damp basement with a 7-foot ceiling. "Your space sets your limitations for work. If you have a larger space, it frees you to expand your work and mind."

The need for space goes beyond the physical building. As Skinner flips through journals that document her travels, books studied and information on upcoming shows, she again makes reference to this sacred need for space, even within these journals. "Sometimes you have this idea and you need time for it to gestate, and become a part of you," she says, indicating a drawing precluded by several blank pages, ready for new work. She knows that soon, in this sacred space, that idea will come to fruition. ■