You may have noticed that this journal feels slightly heftier than past years. Contained within these pages is a review of five Skowhegan summers, as well as dynamic off-campus projects and behind-the-scenes work that took place between 2015–2020. This has been a transformative period for Skowhegan: we have invested heavily in the future, through strategic and capital planning, staff development, governance, and fundraising. Institutions sometimes need to turn inward to do the challenging, structural work that can’t be seen on the outside, but is critical to moving forward successfully. Our intention these past several years has been to ensure Skowhegan’s stability and presence for generations to come. The decisions we have made radiate from our abiding focus—the nine-week session—and how Skowhegan can be its strongest self in the world. We are glad to share our progress with you here.

Several notable developments are reflected in the following pages. The first is the expansion of off campus alumni programs, including curated thematic series and open-call projects organized by the Alianas. These installations, performances and public programs, which included alumni from the 1950s through the present, have animated Skowhegan’s space in New York City and, in 2020, took place virtually via Common House events. Over the past several years, the Faculty Lecture Archive was fully digitized and the remarkable collection of 700+ artist talks is now available online to alumni and researchers.

Attesting to the enduring importance of our physical campus, we committed to a Master Plan that represents the first comprehensive consideration of our 350-acre grounds and 80+ buildings. The seeds of this work began with a strategic plan in 2012 that reaffirmed the centrality of the landscape and farm buildings as an inextricable aspect of Skowhegan’s pedagogy. We spent several years cataloging the needs of the existing buildings and addressing existing maintenance, so that our infrastructure was strong enough to begin, in 2016, to imagine the future. The resulting plan, detailed on pages 33–37, comprises a series of capital projects that reflect Skowhegan’s commitment to promoting a safe and equitable experience for the artists and staff living and working on our rural campus.

During this period, our team has evolved and grown. There is an alumni coordinator; a Counseling Dean is available on campus to address the inevitable challenges that come from living in community, but also in living so closely with oneself; our fundraising and outreach has galvanized and grown in support of our mission; the summer program staff are dream-teams. The collective commitment at Skowhegan is awesome, and the continuity of our staff enables each summer to come together with new participants and faculty who can define their own Skowhegan. Likewise, the Trustees and Governors have been extraordinary advocates for the school, and we have benefited from dedicated leadership these past five years including our current Chairs and President, Ann Gund, Donald Moffett and Alan Wanzenberg, and past leaders Carrie Moyer and Greg Palm.

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And then came 2020, a year which brought every imaginable challenge: a global pandemic; urgent social action; a careening economy; divisive politics; devastating fires and natural disasters; and profound isolation—emotionally and physically. As we determined how best to respond, I was continually reminded of how precious and rare it is to be part of an organization that values its people above all else. When we closed the office, and made the difficult decision to postpone the session, the priority was the summer program staff and faculty, all of whom were paid—a decision that shouldn’t be stunning, but sadly, in our field, is.

Skowhegan’s governance structure is one of its defining features, and the Trustees and Governors contributed meaningfully to its successful passage through these challenging months. As a group, we held robust conversations about how to manage the pandemic’s financial challenges, including whether to take funding from the CARES Act (ultimately, we did not) and how to reimagine the Awards Dinner virtually, which aired in mid-September and drew over 800 viewers from across the country. There was space and time for focused conversations about priorities for the future, including our Environmental impact as a program and innovative discussions surrounding the core program. And with writers Ingrid Schaffner and Faye Hirsh, we dug into Skowhegan’s past and made meaningful progress on the first Skowhegan book (publication forthcoming).

In short, the pause occasioned by COVID-19 created the space for possibility and strategic visioning. Nowhere was this more visible than on campus, where we decided to fast-track two Master Plan buildings. The lakeside Dining Hall will be rebuilt with a modestly increased footprint to facilitate several important goals. Additional space in the kitchen will expand the cooks’ capacity to prepare diverse menus and enable them to purchase and store more goods from regional farms and growers. And the dining room will be big enough for the whole community to gather together under one roof on cold or rainy nights. Nearby, a new participant house will accommodate eleven people. The urgency of this project, planned before COVID-19, was reinforced by it; and the new building will be named in honor of David C. Driskell, class of 1953, who was an active participant in the great continued responsibility of giving access, support, and exchange to artists of subsequent generations, regardless of their backgrounds.

In his 2011 oral history, Bill King reflected on the crucial role Skowhegan can play for the artists it welcomes, summer after summer: “Skowhegan is the pivot. For better or worse, it’s the decision—are you going to go to the studio and make art, or are you not. Every day, it’s the same choice. And Skowhegan pointed that out to me.” Most years, Skowhegan, the institution, has not needed to pivot. It has acted responsively to support the individual and community needs of its artists, but it has not had to fundamentally rethink itself. The year 2020 required agility and a reconsideration of everything that we do. By holding onto our values and ethics, Skowhegan is meeting the challenges of our times and seizing opportunities to remain a vital space for artists for generations to come.