

Peters Valley Crafts Education Center

Managing a Contemporary Crafts Center in a Historic District

At first blush, managing a contemporary crafts center in a historic district may not seem ripe for conflict. But the potential for conflict increases as the complexity of management increases, and that is true of Peters Valley Crafts Education Center.

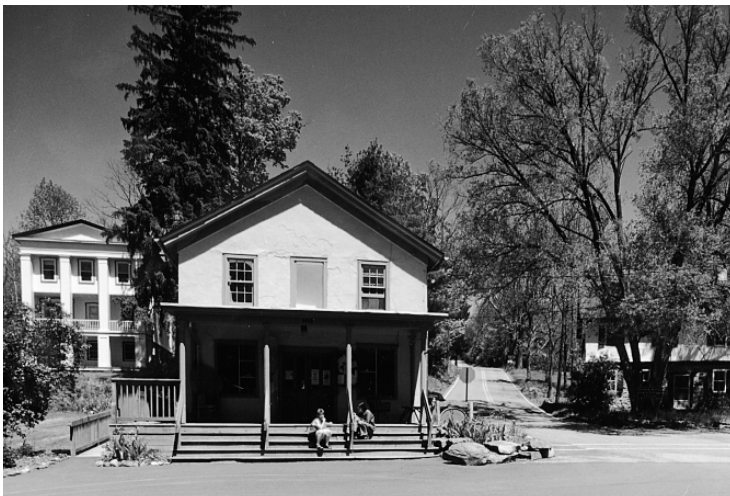
Peters Valley is a multi-faceted organization. One part residential community where a large percentage of the staff lives and works; one part school for fine arts with over 1,500 students of all ages and over 120 instructors; one part independent business providing primary financial support for approximately 14 households and 45 employees throughout the year; one part-non profit organization requiring complicated financial structures, administrative relationships, and public relations initiatives; and one part interpretive center with over 30,000 visitors per year. All this takes place within 36 buildings, 14 of which are historic structures that are spread throughout 3,600 acres. Managing this contemporary craft center requires the ability to balance potentially conflicting priorities while celebrating common ground.

Most of the 14 historic structures are located within the campus' identifiable center and create a concise historic district. For the

uninitiated visitor, the historic district provides a natural sense of arrival, but does little to communicate where they have actually arrived. The sudden tight cluster of buildings causes people to pause as they wind their way along country roads. If they slow down enough, they might catch a sign proclaiming the craft education center; and if they stop, they might notice the craft store and gallery, payphone, or public restrooms. Even with recent additions of modern craft sculptures, contemporary craft window displays in the store, and more informative signage, the historic nature of the buildings lead most uninformed visitors to expect a historical reenactment of craft rather than a contemporary school for fine art that focuses on craft media. In part, this problem stems from old New Jersey road maps and signs that refer to Peters Valley as a craft "village" and not a school; but for the most part, the architecture itself sends the biggest message.

Few visitors simply stumble upon Peters Valley. Most come in connection with a destination activity, such as taking or teaching a class, attending the annual craft fair, shopping in the store, viewing live demonstrations, or participating in a residency program. For these visitors, the historic district enhances their sense of arrival. The store and gallery, main office, cafeteria, and student check-in are located within the middle of the historic district. From there, the campus branches out in three directions, each supporting a combination of dormitories, studios, residences, and support structures. During the summer workshops, when students stay overnight and eat in the cafeteria, the historic center pulses with activity as participants travel from dorms to studios to the cafeteria to the office and back. Much like its 19th-century incarnation, the center reflects the community's life. The picture book church holds gatherings for slide presentations and lectures on often-soulful artistic expressions. The general store still functions as the primary retail outlet. The converted meetinghouse is part

Located at a crossroads near Layton, NJ, the central campus of Peters Valley Crafts Education Center forms a historic district. The former general store has been adapted to a contemporary crafts store and gallery. NPS photo.





Contemporary wood crafting. Summer workshops typically run for 2-5 days and attract students of all ages for hands on instruction working with wood, textiles, ceramics, fine metals, and photography. NPS photo by Richard Frear.

cafeteria and part student lounge. And the single-family homes still provide housing as dormitories or staff residences. In a strange way, the center functions much like it did in the 19th century.

As a school, Peters Valley competes for students against several other nationally prominent centers, each with their own unique setting. Clearly, some of our students seek out our rural location within the breathtaking and historic Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (NRA). They embrace the charm and ambiance that helps them escape their everyday lives and focus on their art. For them, Peters Valley is a spiritual and intellectual oasis. Unfortunately, the center's antiquated rural aesthetic is not for everyone and is not without its own set of unique challenges.

Some of our students come to study a specific topic or under a particular instructor; they don't necessarily come for the environment. In fact, the atypical dormitory style, lack of air conditioning, dirt roads, and surprising rural setting spread out over a two-mile diameter is sometimes a great shock, despite attempts to celebrate and promote these features. Fighting to maintain modern plumbing, heating, and comfort standards within early-20th- and late-19th-century structures is not always easy. Power outages are frequent as are water contamination problems, struggles to maintain ailing furnaces, and unexpected emergencies within the century old structures. Similarly, as our student population grows and technology changes, the slightly restricted studio environments, outdated utility connections, and limited financial resources create a constant battle to remain responsive to our students' needs.

The biggest challenge is allocating the organization's limited financial resources and balancing the multitude of requests for facility upgrades against required maintenance, emergency repairs, and improvements that positively impact public perception. Added to this is the difficulty in obtaining philanthropic funding for federally owned buildings with short-term leases along with a tight operating budget with no cash reserves, endowments, or capital campaigns. Then add the special and sometimes costly requirements of maintaining historic structures, and the challenges grow. The question of allocating extremely limited financial resources quickly falls into a philosophical and moral dilemma. Which master does the organization serve? It is easy to see how an organization's business goals might be in direct conflict with the park's preservation strategies, especially when the organization relies heavily on earned income.

Rarely do we question the importance of preserving the historic structures, but the question of what is the best use of the organization's financial resources is always present. Choosing between an income-producing activity and a preservation investment is a common split. While preserving the structures is central to our lease agreement and in the long-term best interest of the historic district, the organization's immediate survival and commitment to the essential elements of its mission hold a higher priority. The most rewarding solutions address a variety of issues, such as supporting the school's programmatic or educational goals, improving public perception, and even raising additional earned income while preserving a historic structure. Clearly, finding the right tenant for these historic structures is extremely important, as is developing a sense of shared clarity around expectations.

Managing a contemporary craft center in a historic district within a national park is an interesting mix of great beauty, significant challenges, and successful collaborations. Without open and free communication with National Park Service staff, the creative problem-solving process that enabled us to balance potentially conflicting priorities would not be possible. Like making art, the process is one of continual evaluation, self-critique, and reinvention so that the organization's form and expression reflect its highest and best potential.

Kenn Jones was executive director of the Peters Valley Crafts Education Center November 1996-October 2000.