

Program graduates have designs on the world

TRADITION: Allan Close carries the past with him while he teaches students to design the future.

By Ruthanne Urquhart
Algonquin Times staff

Allan Close — and his students — benefit daily from his grandfather's life's work, and "...it's kind of eerie sometimes," he admits.

Close, a professor in the interior design program at Woodroffe campus, is a Hamiltonian who graduated from Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto.

His grandfather, Frank R. Close, was a lithographer who devoted 38 years of his life to the Hamilton Board of Education. He was very pro-active, and through his lobbying Hamilton launched the Central Technical Institute, the first of its kind in Canada. CTI was renamed the F. R. Close Technical Institute in honor of 'the father of technical education.'

"He died in 1952," says Close. "I was just a kid, and we never had any conversations about education, but I've often speculated that he'd be quite tickled that our college system exists, to a great degree, because of him and his work. And throughout my life, I've been receiving the benefits of what my grandfather started."

Close himself started as a part-time instructor at Algonquin's Colonel By campus. Interior design was a three-year 'technician' program with an 'advanced' fourth year. The distinction was dropped because the marketplace didn't recognize two tiers of skill.

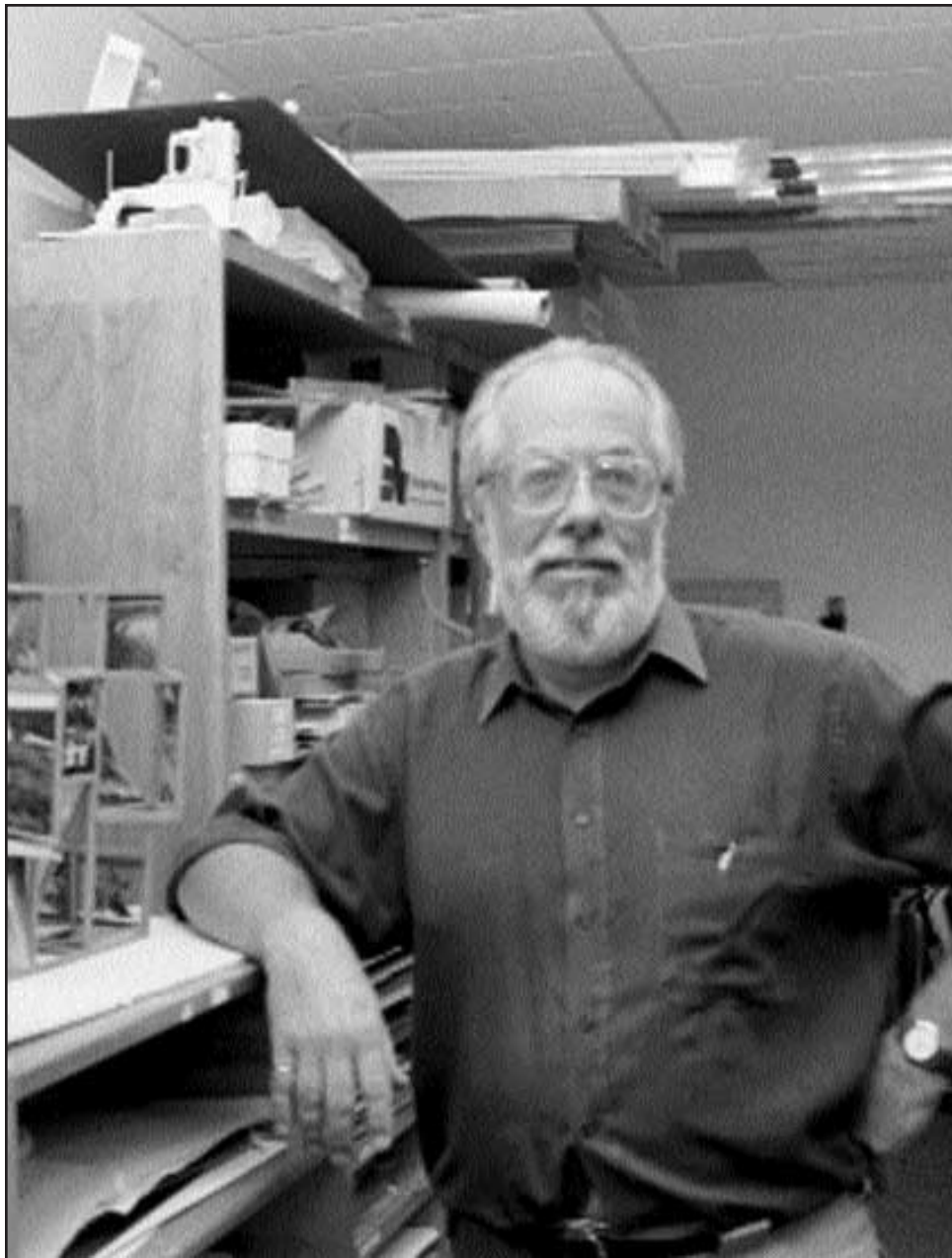
Algonquin planned to move interior design to Woodroffe, but "...we wandered in the wilderness for a year or so," says Close. "They shifted us over to that abysmal high school on Lanark Avenue (Champlain campus) with the huge asbestos problem. They got us out of there and stuck us in an office building (Meadowlands campus)."

The sparkling Woodroffe campus should have seemed a silver lining, but Close remembers it was regarded as a sort of Purgatory.

"I mean, Colonel By — on the canal, restaurants all around, ivy-covered walls — it had ambience. For us, down there, this (Woodroffe) was a wasteland."

The final move was made in September 1993, and feelings changed overnight. Close recalls standing at a third-floor window in state-of-the-art J building with Gordon Good (Co-ordinator, Continuing Education), looking across the campus to the sunset.

"Gord turned to me and said, 'This is too good. I just know they're going to take this away from us.'"



Allan Close
1997

Dianne Vroom photo

Interior design initially shared space with horticulture and recreation — strange bedfellows — but eventually came under the umbrella of Media & Design Studies.

"It's been a big change for us," says Close. "The premises; the managerial competence. Abla Sherif (Chairperson, Media & Design Studies) is the best manager we've ever had, by far."

Other changes haven't been so positive. Student contact hours used to be 32 hours per week; now it's 20. Interior design is offering a stripped-down four-year program in a three-year framework, and the slump in the construction industry has caused a drop to 70 per cent in placements from what Close calls the "halcyon days of 100 per cent."

"The program, as it exists now, is less than what it used to be," Close admits. "It's not as rich; it's not as broad. We've cut out not only any perceptible fat, but we've cut

muscle tissue and bone matter. Like other programs across the college, we're hurting."

Close is confident, however, that the program still turns out some of the best grads in the profession.

"In Toronto, Ryerson and Humber seem to have things locked up," he says. "But when we have grads doing fieldwork (placements) there, they almost invariably

are offered jobs at the end of their two-week period. That happened with all four of them this year."

Algonquin's interior design grads dominate the profession in the Ottawa area. Many current grads do their placements at firms owned and/or staffed by previous grads of the program. And because about 90 per cent of interior design students at Algonquin are women, here in Ottawa it's "the old girls network," says Close. "Algonquin hires Algonquin."

After 20-odd years of teaching at Algonquin, Close says students haven't changed much. First-year students are still in their mid-twenties, on average, and about 40 per cent of them still have either a partial or full degree, or some career experience.

And the program maintains its policy of hiring 12 to 15 part-time instructors each semester who are practicing designers or architects, which allows the faculty to pass along to students their up-to-date knowledge of the profession.

According to Close, it pays off.

"Many grads have said that the worst time they had in the program was just before they went out on fieldwork. They were terrified. 'What am I going to do if they ask me to do something, and I can't do it?' Of course, that's never happened. They come back and say, 'Hey, I did it all. I could handle anything they threw at me.'"

Close is proud of the interior design program, and of the grads who are spread around the world, from Nortel, across Woodroffe Avenue, to Singapore.

"One of the things I've always liked about Algonquin — and I'm not sure if it's Algonquin or the college system — is that, in spite of some of the strange circumlocutions that the Fifth Floor gets into, in the trenches it tends to be very pragmatic. The success of a program is predicated by the fact that graduates get meaningful work in their chosen profession. We are a successful program."

It's likely that Close's grandfather would be equally proud.

"It's kind of interesting — these connections that occur through life," Close muses. "There are always connective threads. Sometimes students bemoan the fact that they've done a Poly Sci degree or something before they've come here, and I say, 'It's not wasted; nothing's wasted. It's all going to come together somewhere.'"



Allan Close and students in the interior design class
1985

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—Allan Close
Professor, interior design