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Art brightens bleak landscape

To describe the decor of the Old Brewery Mission downtown as stark would constitute an act of charity.

By The Gazette (Montreal) December 1, 2007 [Be the first to post a comment](#)

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To describe the decor of the Old Brewery Mission downtown as stark would constitute an act of charity.

In the chronically underfunded homeless services sector in Montreal, money goes to staffing and little is left for extravagances like plumbing repairs, paint or signs of a human touch.

Until recently, most of the surroundings matched the residents' current station in life: bleak. But an innovative collaboration with the students of Concordia University's arts department, involving a panel of fabric and a little caring, has injected some much-needed humanity and optimism and opened a rare bridge between the worlds of academia and the homeless.

For many of the 340 men who sleep in the city's largest shelter every night, temporary home is a bed in an open room of 70 metal bunk beds spaced about one metre apart. In the words of René Lacroix, head of resident services at the mission, it resembles a Red Cross emergency relief set-up in a gymnasium.

Things are slightly more upscale for the 39 residents on the fifth floor who stay for an average of a month while they figure out their next step in life. They're in tightly spaced bunk beds, too, but they have small cupboards for their belongings. Until recently, however, they had no partitions, and no privacy.

Then architect Amy Neff, working with local firm Grenier + Richards Architects, suggested students from Concordia supply works of art printed on fabric that could be hung from the sides of the bunks. They would be both utilitarian - providing some privacy - and humanitarian, lending colour, warmth and a human touch.

The project has been such a success it has caused problems: Some residents have tried to take two panels to hang beside their beds, giving them full closure (not allowed for security reasons). Others have been stolen.

"I think that's great," said Concordia fabric arts teacher Laura Endacott, whose students along with those of the art education department have created close to 100 panels since the project began last year. "If someone with no possessions in their life, if that's the joy it brings them ..."

It is the only program of its kind in North America that Endacott has heard of.

"It creates a personalized space within a collective space," she said, and treats the homeless with a "little more humanity and respect."

Students pick such themes as hope, reality or inspiration. The most popular request by residents was for depictions of nude women. That was vetoed. Second choice was often for landscapes, because space is so tight in the dorm.

Panels depicting sunsets and forests and lone trees in the wilderness predominate. There are birds for freedom and words of inspiration, including some in Chinese characters. The majority of students are female, and they lent a domestic, nurturing touch, Endacott said. One of the few male students took a different perspective, drawing a scene of a ship on the waves, bearing through the storm.

"He wanted to address the men's sense of pride," she said.

Photography major Jasmine Bakalarz did a portrait of a resident and transferred it to fabric. On the verge of leaving, he appears both proud and confident, a message worth passing on to residents who follow.

It was a learning experience for Bakalarz, whose image of the homeless was shattered by the number of young people who live at the mission.

Residents are invited to take the panels with them once they leave for their next stage in life.

Many of them do.

A vernissage for the latest panels created by the Concordia students will be held tomorrow from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. in the cafeteria of the Old Brewery Mission, 915 Clark St., near the Place d'Armes métro.

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