

Mir Centre for Peace at Selkirk College

“Understanding and Building Cultures of Peace”



*A Brief Narrative History
At the 40th Anniversary of Selkirk College*

Mir Centre for Peace
A Brief Narrative History



Mir Press at Selkirk College
Autumn 2006

There are many beautiful walks along the Selkirk College grounds—pathways which lead students and teachers beyond the normal halls of learning, toward the inspirations of nature and the significance of cultural history.

Selkirk College, the province's first community college, is founded in history and amidst the unique natural beauty of the West Kootenay region. The point of land which is bounded by the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers has been a point of contact for cultures over several millennia—first with the Aboriginal peoples who travelled this rich natural corridor following the seemingly limitless runs of salmon which brought life and wealth, then with early explorers who followed river systems on their ways to the Pacific rim, and later with the early settlers who created communities and life on the rich south-facing slopes of the river valleys.

Among the most prominent of those early settlers were the Doukhobors—or *Spirit Wrestlers*—a pacifist Christian sect who, with the help of Lev Tolstoy and the Quakers, sought a new spiritual homeland in exile from their origins in Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia. Beginning in 1908, several thousand community members began moving from their lands on the Canadian Prairies in order to start a new utopian community in the narrow mountain valleys of the Kootenays. For about three decades, the Doukhobors established one of the largest and most successful communal, pacifist, and utopian communities in North American history. This grand social experiment came to an end beginning in 1939 when the Doukhobor lands went into receivership and eventually bankruptcy. Much controversy still surrounds the root causes leading to the end of the original Doukhobor communities.

Today, when one walks on the ridge which extends above the College grounds and looks out onto the water meadows which extend down to the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers, one can still see, if one looks very carefully, part of the embedded history of the Kootenays—the remnants of rich cultures which humanized this landscape.

At the furthest remove there are the merest whispers—in the concavities of ancient pit houses, in the burial sites, and in the arrangement of rock fish traps—of the first peoples of this region, the Sinixt and other native groups who gathered here to share and trade.¹ Closer in historical time, are the abandoned orchards, and the one red-brick communal home, which stand on the bluff as reminders of the classical Doukhobor village life. Selkirk College which inherited these beautiful lands for education beginning in 1966 now is a latter day caretaker of the history and culture embedded in this soil.

¹ From its inception the Mir Centre for Peace has held a space open for First Nations peoples—the earliest human inhabitants of this land. Although historically a source of life for many Aboriginal groups, the Mir lands are generally acknowledged as part of the original territory of the Sinixt people.

The ideas of caretaking, and of responsibility to culture and history, have in recent years become particularly important to the communities which make up Selkirk College. The people who find employment at this institution, its students, and those who walk its lands, have come to understand that they stand on a landscape of immense human significance, irreplaceable in the history of the province, and that they, too, are part of that living history.²

In autumn 1999, some of those people who walk the paths on this point of land began to recognize that the historical Doukhobor community which cultivated and humanized these lands, a complex community which stood for, if not always achieved, a radical pacifism, a radical utopian ideal of community, and radical spiritual unity among all peoples, was fading into the earth. Where once there had been numerous red brick communal homes on these lands, now there was just one traditional Doukhobor home alone on the bluff above the rivers and in an advanced state of disrepair. Where once there had been scores of people living in this village alone—named *Ostrov* in Russian, or *Island*, as these lands sometimes became at high water marks before the damming of the rivers—now there were just a few hardy souls left behind by time.

In the large communal house, just one elderly Doukhobor woman remained—Nettie Plotnikoff—she lived a simple, and increasingly difficult, life on her own cultivating a garden in summer. Just across the way, was a smaller wooden house, then inhabited by Christine Faminoff (the long time curator and caretaker of the Doukhobor Museum in Castlegar) and her mother, Mary Faminoff (Mary's husband, Bill, had passed away not long before). For those who knew these women even slightly, it was clear that before long the last Doukhobor inhabitants of *Ostrov* Village would close a page on history. A question arose in their minds: what would happen to the last buildings of this village, and what would happen to all the history which was embedded in this land.

That autumn, there were initial meetings with the President of Selkirk College, Leo Perra. An idea began to grow that, perhaps, drawing on Doukhobor traditions, on ancient practices of First Nations peoples, and on more recent traditions of the counter-culture, pacifism, and the anti-war movement, that a Centre for Peace might be imagined for this ancient cultural site at the confluence of two rivers.

Dr. Perra was known in the latter stages of his career as a person who understood the workings of the provincial education system, a person who knew how to gain the attention of bureaucrats and educators in Victoria. When he was

² The idea of embedded history—traces of historical meaning and desire inscribed in the land—has become an important concept for understanding the Mir project. At its base is a recognition that all human beings exist within significant historical landscapes; they are shaped by the land and in turn create their own identities through work which is embedded in the earth. History, understood in this way, becomes an ongoing dialogue between those who have come before and those who walk the land today.

asked about the Doukhobor village on the hill just a brief 10-minute walk from the front doors of the College, he recalled earlier more radical days of the Doukhobor community when the separation between ethnic groups was much more intense, and much more confusing. In the autumn of 1999, he simply said that the idea of a peace centre—for Selkirk College and the Kootenays—was “an idea whose time had come.”

He advised those who had this vision to set to work immediately, and out of this encouragement was born a more focused idea, that of the Mir Centre for Peace—*Mir* being an ancient Russian word with the complex meaning of peace, community, and world. For the founders of this vision, *Mir* seemed a fitting word to express the complex strands of culture, intellect, and spirit which bind historical memory to present belief and practice.

First meetings were held in the autumn and winter of 1999—at that time a loosely based consensual model was developed which included members of the Selkirk College community and the broader community.³ This early period saw tremendous growth in awareness of what the Mir Centre for Peace might stand for, and what kind of focus it might become for all those who sought justice and peace in their lives, in their communities, and in the world.

In 2000 a strong connection was established with B.C. Heritage Trust in Victoria, especially in relation to the historic Doukhobor home which would become the site of the Mir Centre. Eventually three different grants were received from B.C. Heritage Trust: one to conduct a feasibility study into restoring the historic building, another for detailed architectural and engineering drawings, and a final grant in the amount of \$35,000 for physical reconstruction of the Mir building. In total, B.C. Heritage Trust contributed well over \$50,000 toward the reconstruction of a unique heritage building in the Province.⁴

In the autumn of 2000, it was felt that the last remaining members of the Doukhobor community remaining at the Ostrov village should be fully informed of what the College hoped to do in the future with the Doukhobor communal home and the physical site.

This was a difficult moment in the history of the Mir Centre: at first a letter was sent—without prior explanation—to the Faminoff’s who resided in the small wooden house. The Faminoff’s responded with understandable concern: what would happen to their homes, to themselves, would they lose their property in the way Doukhobors of a prior generation had lost their properties.

³ Early members of the Mir Steering Committee included: Leo Perra, Kathleen Pinckney, John J. Verigin Jr., Liana Zwick, Fred Arishenkoff, Eileen Kooznetsoff, Fred Makortoff, Gordon Turner, Gerry Gauthier, Delyse Sylvester, Terry Baugh, Linda Wilkinson, Myler Wilkinson.

⁴ By autumn 2001, using B.C. Heritage Trust funds, a reconstructed roof was completed on the Mir building thus saving the structure from further deterioration. Original architectural and engineering drawings for the Mir house were provided by Fairbank Architects of Nelson.

A private meeting was arranged in early October 2000, with John J. Verigin Jr. in attendance. As John pulled into the Faminoff's driveway, the faces of Christine and Mary could be seen waiting at the door. Inside their living room, Christine began to speak about the ways in which Doukhobors had been misunderstood and mistreated by provincial and federal governments. She began to look in her trunks for old letters from the province going back decades. Finally, frustrated and angry, she gave up looking and turned to John Verigin. He spoke to her calmly about how the idea of *Mir* was an idea which honoured community, and heritage, and the beliefs of all the peoples of the province; how the Doukhobor tradition would be a central part of the Mir Centre for Peace. Christine's face changed and softened as she listened to John's words; she turned to him and hugged him saying that she understood what the Mir Centre was trying to do, and that she supported it. In a 10-minute period Christine Faminoff, one of the Doukhobor community's most sincere believers, had gone from confusion and anger to positive acceptance.

This narrative is recorded here because it marks an important moment in the micro-history of what the Mir Centre has become, and will be—a place of acceptance, reconciliation, openness, fairness, honesty, and finally, love. From this moment on, both Christine Faminoff and her mother Mary became staunch supporters of the idea of the Mir Centre.⁵

In this same period it became apparent that a baseline philosophy of the Mir Centre for Peace needed to be established. What were the goals of Mir, what were its codes of conduct, how would it link to the communities and cultures of the Kootenays. It was understood early on that if the Mir Centre were to become a reality it would need to recognize and grow from the embedded histories of the land itself—the struggles of peoples such as the First Nations Sinixt and the Doukhobors, and the Japanese-Canadians who were interned in the Slocan Valley. These histories, and the blood of generations, were planted deep in the earth—telling stories of political struggle, of peace-making, of utopian belief, of personal and communal search for justice, and of reconciliation. Original members of the Mir Centre for Peace drafted a set of principles, based in knowledge, practice, and compassion, which remain at the heart of what Mir is and will be.⁶

⁵ Sadly, within two weeks of this historic meeting Christine Faminoff had passed away after a struggle with cancer. The meeting with Christine came late in her life, but fortunately not too late. A clear understanding and acceptance was reached between her and the people who first imagined the Mir Centre for Peace. For some this seemed an essential “blessing” of the ground. Shortly afterwards, Mary Faminoff, the last Doukhobor resident of *Ostrov* village, decided to go into a nursing home. When she left her home, she asked that the structure be donated for use as part of the Mir Centre for Peace.

⁶ The original philosophical goals of the Mir Centre for Peace included the following: ▪ the fostering of non-violent interaction at all levels ▪ the acceptance of cultural, socio-economic, and gender inclusion across communities ▪ the recognition of heritage and historical values connected with local community and specific cultures of peace ▪ the commitment to consensus-based community

In June 2000, after more than 20 years in the position, Dr. Leo Perra stepped down as President of Selkirk College. The new President, Marilyn Luscombe, assumed her duties and immediately made it clear that she supported the work that had begun on the Mir Centre for Peace. In the first few years of her Presidency, Luscombe spearheaded fundraising activities as well as community events connected with the Mir Centre.⁷

One other signal event occurred that June: Stephen Lewis, Canada's former Ambassador to the United Nations and Special Envoy on the problem of AIDS in Africa, came to visit our region and to give a large public talk. John Verigin Jr. was asked to give Mr. Lewis a ride from Nelson to the Castlegar Airport in the late afternoon; at the last minute the group in the car decided to drive up the gravel road to the Mir Centre for Peace just opposite the airport. Lewis was tired from travelling and lecturing, and was half slumped in his seat. As the car came down the winding country road, a landscape of immense beauty opened up before his eyes—the confluence of two great rivers, the old orchards which marked the communal beliefs of a people, golden light settling on the green mountains. Mr. Lewis sat up and began to take notice; he listened to the ideas, and the ideals, of the Mir Centre for Peace, and he said: “this is what you have, this is what is special, you can build your peace centre on this soil, its history, and people everywhere in Canada will take notice.” Lewis offered his personal help if the Mir Centre needed it. This approval was very important to Mir members in the difficult years of development work ahead.

In June 2001 an historic ceremony was held at the Mir site to bless the land and to recognize the traditional inhabitants of the site. Special invitations were made

building ▪ the recognition of the crucial importance of peace keeping and peace making at local, national, and international levels ▪ the fostering of student awareness and character through courses, programs, and research which contribute to an understanding of peace and an awareness of the mechanisms which lead to peaceful societies ▪ the recognition that peace and violence issues and potential solutions may include all of the following dimensions—the individual, the family, the community, civil society, government, and NGOs ▪ the awareness that global environmental and ecological issues are linked to human rights, social justice, and, ultimately, peace ▪ the understanding that any study of peace and human rights must also include an awareness of their dark opposites: war, violence, and oppression ▪ the recognition that the United Nations designation of the year 2000 as the Year for the Creation of the Culture of Peace presupposes a global human commitment to active preparation for peace, rather than a passive acceptance of the inevitability of war and aggression ▪ the final recognition that all of the above values and commitments must be subjected to the highest standards of intellectual, ethical, and practical endeavour on the part of all those connected with the Mir Centre.

⁷ At the beginning of President Luscombe's tenure, the Mir Steering Committee was a collective of voices from the College and the community. This early phase of development—based largely in consensus decision making—continued for several years until the Mir Centre was restructured. The last official Mir Steering Committee was held on 14 December 2004, when it was decided that the Mir structure should contain the following elements: a Building Completion and Fund Raising Campaign Committee, a Community Advisory Group to the Mir Centre, and a Mir Programming Council comprised of College instructors, administrators, and employees.

to the First Nations people, in particular the Sinixt, as well as the Doukhobor community and to the community at large. The spokesperson for the Sinixt people, Marilyn James, spoke of the ceremony as a healing process; her people had been declared extinct, but their presence here “was living evidence that we are not extinct. We are honoured to be acknowledged by Selkirk College and the Doukhobor people and to participate in this remarkable event.”

Elders of the Sinixt nation were also invited to speak, and Eva Orr, then 92 years old, told the more than 300 people who had gathered on a warm June evening that she was happy to be at this site where her people had gathered for millennia, that she supported the idea of a centre for peace and reconciliation, and finally that she knew her people, especially the young, needed to be educated not only in the traditions of her people but in the practises of the modern world. She ended by saying that Selkirk College in its role as educator and peace maker was “a good place” for her people and others. Eva Orr’s words were followed by a smudge ceremony which blessed the land in its past incarnations and in its future undertakings. Using smouldering sweetgrass, the Sinixt elder wafted the smoke in the four directions of the compass. She said: “That’s the way the ancestors did it. They touched the four corners of the earth.” At the end of this traditional First Nations ceremony, John J. Verigin Jr. was asked to speak on behalf of the Doukhobor community, but at this particular gathering his actions spoke louder than any words he might have chosen. Verigin asked permission to honour the First Nations elders in the traditional way of the Doukhobors. Receiving permission, Verigin stepped from the podium, knelt on the dusty ground, and bowed his forehead to the earth facing the elders. An observer recorded this moment in the following way: “to my way of thinking, he [John Verigin] recognized the Sinixt Nation in the most profound way a Doukhobor can recognize another culture.”⁸

In autumn 2001, a special commemorative event occurred in the offices of President Marilyn Luscombe. In memory of their relative, Christine Faminoff, and of the Doukhobors who had settled the lands where Selkirk College now stands, the Oglow family—Pete, Mary, John, Betty, Paul, and Mary Faminoff—presented a traditional carved wooden ladle to the College. Ladles of this type have been given to such people as Nelson Mandela and Mikhail Gorbachev.

The following year, 2002, was a time of consolidation and fundraising for the Mir Centre for Peace. That June, the Selkirk College Foundation with the support of Marilyn Luscombe held a community gathering in the Staff Lounge. Amongst the donors at this gathering were Columbia Power Corporation, B.C. Hydro, the USCC Doukhobor Community, Regional District of

⁸ Gordon Turner, Instructor at Selkirk College and columnist for the Castlegar Citizen: June 24, 2002.

Central Kootenay, Castlegar Society for Self Awareness, PPWC Local 26, Human Services and International Education at the College, and Kalesnikoff Lumber.⁹ Later in the afternoon, a special gathering occurred at the Mir site to place a formal sign; to commemorate the event there was traditional singing of a Doukhobor choir, and native prayer and song offered by Dr. Duncan Grady, a member of the Siksika/Sauk Nation and instructor in the Human Services program at the College. Dr. Grady finished with a haunting offering to peace—a traditional prayer played on an eagle bone whistle.

By 2003, The Mir Centre for Peace was designated as an official goal area of Selkirk College and began to take on a more formal role in College activities. In that same year, through the early spring, monies were raised which allowed the College to reconstruct the front brick façade of the Doukhobor home. At the same time, Federal funds administered through School District #20 were allocated toward the building of a traditional First Nations smokehouse at the Mir site. Nearby, throughout the late winter and into late spring 2003, students of the Stanley Humphries building trades program, directed by instructor Don Lust, were constructing a First Nations open air Arbour. Built entirely of natural wood, with a central fire pit, and circular seating for up to 100 people, the Arbour—both a gathering and ceremonial structure—has become a central focus for community events, performances, and teaching related to peace and social justice.¹⁰

⁹ Prominent individual donors to the Mir Centre for Peace include the following: Judith Harroff—whose generous initial donation led to the KMC Foundation in Vancouver donating \$25,000 over five years for peace studies programming; Gordon Weese and Lydia West—whose personal contributions provided a foundation for the Mir Library Fund; Peter P. Rezansoff, President and CEO of Intertech Construction Group, and his uncle, Alex Rilkoff—whose contributions were extended out of respect for their Doukhobor heritage and for a belief in “toil and peaceful life” and “cultures of peace”; the Ross family—Jack and Dottie—Nowick Gray, Ann MacNab and others connected with the Society of Friends Meeting, or Quakers, in Argenta for their facilitation of a library donation from the Non-Violence Resource Centre (this generous donation marks over 100 years of connection with, and support for, the Doukhobor community as the Quakers played a significant role in helping the Doukhobors emigrate to Canada in 1899); Ken Kalesnikoff—whose family owns Kalesnikoff Lumber in Thrums, B.C. The original promise of donation—which included specialty cut fir planks for heritage restoration of floors and foundation—was made by Pete Kalesnikoff, founder of the lumber company; three years later, at the appropriate time, his son Ken delivered that lumber to the Mir site. He said he wished to “honour” his father’s promise; and, finally, the Wilkinson family—who helped create the Mir Award with funds gained from the Tolstoy Cultural Tour and donated all royalties from *Russian Journal* to the Mir Centre for Peace.

¹⁰ Both the First Nations Arbour and the Smokehouse were built as part of “A Building the Community Circle” partnership between Selkirk College, School District #20 (which included the membership of Métis groups and Lower Columbia River All First Nations) and the Sinixt people.

The Mission Statement of the Mir Centre for Peace is the following: “Understanding and Building Cultures of Peace.”¹¹ The physical structures of the Mir site are part of that building process, but through 2004 there was a renewed commitment to “understanding” how peace might be built through education and reflection.¹² The Mir lecture series began in the winter of 2004 with College instructor Rob Macrae presenting on the relationship between “Water, the Environment and Sustainability” and Dr. Duncan Grady lecturing on “The Warrior Tradition: Practising Presence, Practising Peace.”

The following autumn 2004, Selkirk College offered its first formal credit course connected directly with the Mir Centre for Peace—“The Community and the World: Interdisciplinary Studies in Culture and Peace.” This was an innovative course offered in three modules one night a week at the 10th Street campus of Selkirk College in Nelson. The modules were: “In Search of Utopia: Literature and Culture in the Kootenays” led by Dr. Myler Wilkinson; “Women and Peace” with instructor Janet Mayr; and “The Warrior Tradition: Practising Presence, Practising Peace” again taught by Dr. Duncan Grady. Thirty people registered for the course with several more placed on a waiting list. The success of this first offering led directly to serious discussion of a full two year Associate of Arts Degree in Peace Studies at the College—with a projected start date of September 2006.¹³

In October 2004 a highly successful Symposium on Peace, Reconciliation, and Conflict Resolution was held jointly at Selkirk College and at the Brilliant Cultural Centre. Nearly 100 participants from a broad spectrum of the community took part in a series of presentations and workshops which included people such as: Mark Wedge, a chief of the Carcross-Tagish First Nations people in the Northwest Territories and an expert on cultural healing through community “peacemaking” circles; Jonathan Taylor and Jonathan Reams, co-founders of the Institute for Transformative Leadership; Joseph Ravick, expert in conflict resolution and dispute management; and Christena Henry, counsellor in the West Kootenay school system with a special focus on children and peaceful cooperation.

11 *Mir Mission Statement*. Understanding and Building Cultures of Peace ▪ *Mir Vision*: The Mir Centre for Peace will be known for its commitment to education for Peace and peace-building through research, development and implementation of models and programs which promote healing, reconciliation, cooperation and understanding within communities and between nations ▪ *Mir Values*: Peace and social justice for the individual, family, community, and world; respect for cultural, ethnic, philosophical, spiritual, religious, and intellectual diversity; dignity of work and service for the betterment of humanity; education and learning which advance the goals of understanding and building cultures of peace.

12 The concept of “vertical integration” became increasingly important in Mir programming through this period: the idea that many levels of human endeavour and understanding were linked in any serious examination of peace and conflict. These might range from the individual at a psychological and spiritual level, to the family, the community, and ultimately to political, historical, and environmental issues at a global level.

13 “*Introduction to Peace Studies 100/101*” did begin in autumn 2006—Linda Wilkinson instructor—with an enrolment of 19 students.

In February 2005 the Mir Centre for Peace became more closely joined to the operating structures of Selkirk College when a Mir Programming Council was formed with members responsible for developing a long term educational plan for the Mir Centre.¹⁴ Linked to this, a first gathering of a Mir Community Advisory Group took place in Autumn 2005.¹⁵

As this first historical narrative on the Mir Centre for Peace is being written, work continues on the traditional Doukhobor home which is the main structure of the Mir site. Through summer 2005 a complete reconstruction of the outer brick walls, windows, doors, and porches was completed, with plans to continue work on the interior through the late summer and into the autumn. This reconstruction schedule for the heritage building is consistent with President Luscombe's goal of offering courses and holding community events in the building within the next two years.

While formal institutional events continue to be a focus for Mir, there is also a more human, cultural energy which is sustained by the Mir landscape. First Nations people have found a welcoming home on the land at the Mir site from the beginning, and they have provided leadership in determining the future directions of Mir. In addition to early blessing ceremonies and the dedication of the land for the First Nations Arbour and the smoke house, there have also been feasting and giveaway ceremonies in summer 2003 to celebrate

14 Members of the first Mir Programming Council included: Neil Coburn (Dean of Arts and Sciences), Carol Retzlaff (Chair of University Arts and Sciences), Liana Zwick, Marilyn James, Duncan Grady, Randy Janzen (who served as first Chairperson with Myler Wilkinson), Anni Holtby, Linda Wilkinson. Ex-officio: Marilyn Luscombe, Louise Krohn.

15 Members of the first Mir Community Advisory Group which met on 6 October 2005 included: Muriel Walton (chair), Junko Ida—from the Nikkei Memorial Centre in New Denver, Megan Nelson—Selkirk student, Larry Gray—School District #20 Superintendent, Gary Ockenden—currently Canadian director of Amnesty International, John Verigin Jr.—Executive Director of the USCC Doukhobor Community, Fred Makortoff—Doukhobor community, Carolyn Schramm—community representative instrumental in fundraising for the Mir Centre, Crystal Johnson (Marilyn James attending in her place)—representing First Nations communities, Neil Coburn, Carol Retzlaff, and Myler Wilkinson. Marilyn Luscombe—President, and Louise Krohn—Vice President, attended ex-officio. At that first meeting community members identified four “directions” which were important for the future of the Mir Centre. They were: ■ *Cultures of Peace—Recognition and Reconciliation*, which included student opportunity to know and interact with diverse cultural groups in the Kootenays, development of transferable courses and programming, links with community driven peace events and with public school programming ■ *History of Conflict and Transformation to Peace in the Kootenays*, which involved drawing from one's own experience and history in this region, drawing lessons from that history and building a more just community into the future ■ *Centre for Research in “Peace Studies”*, which involved developing historical materials and personal stories of cultures of peace in the Kootenay region, with particular emphasis on traditional cultures ■ *A Sense of Place—“walking the land”*, which involved complete restoration of the Mir heritage house as a physical symbol of history, landscape, and cultures of peace. The Mir Site was seen as a natural link with other important heritage sites in the region—for example the Nikkei Japanese Centre in New Denver.

the aboriginal structures at the Mir site. Hosted by the Sinixt people, the feast and giveaway introduced many community members to the generous food and material cultures of First Nations peoples, cultures in which the sharing of food and physical objects come to signify a larger communal sharing.

Each spring from 2004 onwards, there have been cultural gatherings at the Mir site where hundreds of school children, their teachers and chaperons, have learned about Aboriginal traditions and teachings, the medicine wheel, smudge ceremonies, traditional tanning techniques, and story telling circles. These large spring gatherings exemplify what is meant by the Mir mission statement: “understanding and building cultures of peace” where cultural sharing and respect occur in a landscape which is receptive to healing, generosity, and knowledge shared across cultures. The Mir Centre has also provided a safe site for an aboriginal symposium on grief and loss for service providers and First Nations peoples in addition to continuing work on protocols for First Nations communities as well as curriculum development.¹⁶

The future of the Mir Centre for Peace is built on many foundations—none more important than the spirit and energy of students and youth. In the early years of development, volunteer projects at the Mir site were driven by student idealism—whether a Canada World Youth brigade completing interior demolition work in 2003 or international students performing clean up work over several years, youth has left its indelible mark on the Mir landscape. Following from the first Mir course in autumn 2004, an advisory group of students was brought together at Selkirk College in early spring 2005. Their point of view was made perfectly clear: build on peace courses already offered at the College, develop a peace studies program which focuses on the histories and cultures of peace in the region and beyond, concentrate on spiritual and philosophical traditions of peace, and on the environment and social justice; finally, prepare students to work locally and internationally with NGOs and government agencies in the areas of peace, human rights, and social justice. These recommendations

¹⁶ Aboriginal communities have always been careful to acknowledge the central role of “elders” in community life. Based in this tradition, one must pay respect to elders such as Eva Orr but also to the current generation of leaders, people such as Marilyn James, Aboriginal Advisor at the College and spokesperson for the Sinixt people who once inhabited these river valleys in large numbers. At the Mir site and elsewhere, Marilyn has worked to situate First Nations people within living cultural memory. Out of respect for the most significant “elder” in her own life—her mother, Alvina Lum, who passed away in summer 2003—Marilyn has made significant contributions toward the building of a Mir peace library. First she announced that the Sinixt lawyer, Zool Suleman, would make a donation of \$500 toward the peace library. Then, in June 2006 at a gathering to celebrate work done on the interior of the Mir house, Marilyn bequeathed in her mother’s name a collector’s edition of *The River of Memory: The Everlasting Columbia*. One other person from the Aboriginal community should be mentioned here for her generosity of spirit which continues to draw people of diverse cultures together in a spirit of friendship. In her work through School District #20 as Cultural Coordinator of Aboriginal Education and as a member of the Carrier people herself, Bonnie Vickers has supported both building and cultural events at the Mir Centre for Peace.

would have a direct impact on the shape of future peace studies programming at Selkirk College.¹⁷

The last half of 2005 and into the summer of 2006 marked a number of key steps forward for the Mir Centre for Peace. Significant restoration work was carried out at the Mir house. During summer 2005 the outside walls of the heritage building were dismantled, bricks cleaned of rotten mortar, and the outer brick “skin” of the building completely rebuilt. This accomplishment was possible due to a coming together of professional bricklayers, carpenters, and inspired volunteer workers—in particular mothers and daughters who were led by Sarah Robbie who was joined by her sister Rachel, and her mother Kathryn. By the end of the summer, a renewed heritage brick building looked down on the Columbia River, its mortared walls built to shelter future generations. The progress made this summer galvanized a vision of the Mir site—an historical and geographical location of unique beauty and cultural importance. Touring the house in 2005, President Luscombe reflected on its beauty and wondered aloud what significant events might take place within its walls 50 years into the future.

As summer led into fall and winter 2006, work moved into the interior of the Mir house. The Facilities division of the College, under the direction of Steve Podovennikoff, was able to prepare the upper and lower floors for reconstruction and then begin the process of interior framing and electrical preparation.¹⁸ During this same time period a number of significant guests paid visits to the Mir site, among them: February 2006—Ida Chong, then Provincial Minister of Advanced Education, along with Energy, Natural Resources and Environment Minister, Bill Bennett (who presented a \$5000 cheque to help with an environmentally friendly geothermal heating and cooling system for the

17 One of the brilliant students in the first Mir course, Megan Nelson, went on to make important contributions in several other areas related to Mir. In early 2005, she was hired to research and analyze Peace Studies courses and programs at Canadian Universities and Colleges; in 2006 she developed an annotated bibliography of books to consider in the creation of a peace library at Selkirk College. She also served as student representative on the first Mir Community Advisory Group and in June 2006 was appointed Chair of that group.

18 The entire Facilities division of Selkirk College deserves special mention in the “building” of the Mir Centre for Peace. Among those names are: Steve Podovennikoff—Director of Facilities; John Chernenkoff (who oversaw the first complex phases of reconstruction), Ray Dubé (who took a lead role in the latter stages of renovation), Bob Essauce, Allen Chernenkoff, Rod Retzlaff—carpenters; Al Popoff, Jeff Schuepher—painters; Ed Isakson, Ron Drazdoff, Peter Drazdoff, Dave Briggeman—electrical/communications; Terry Balyk—plumbing; Harvey Bating, Ray Stassi—grounds; John Vandermuellen, Peter Chernoff—flooring and concrete; Gerald Lightburn, Steve Greenwood, Ashley Popoff—labour; Donna Mackie, Carol Mackereth—communications; Corrine Major—Campus Manager. Collectively, these men and women have transformed a half-ruined heritage building into a site for education which is unique in the province of British Columbia, drawing on historic values and using the highest levels of craftsmanship to merge traditional values with future use.

house)19; May 6—Murray Coell, Minister of Advanced Education, who was also opening the new Aviation facilities at Selkirk College (Mr. Coell was said to be so impressed with the Mir site that he requested an image of the house be included on his Ministry website); and finally in June, the Assistant Deputy Minister of Advanced Education, Ruth Wittenberg, came to the Mir Centre. All of these officials were invited and hosted by Marilyn Luscombe as part of her ongoing commitment to raise the profile of the Mir Centre locally, provincially, and nationally.

Leadership for the development of Mir programming has come from many sources; through the last half of 2005 and into 2006 a sustained effort was made by the Programming Council to envision a “Peace Studies Program” at Selkirk College. Critical work was done at this time by Neil Coburn, Dean of Arts and Sciences, who among many other things developed transfer agreements with eastern universities—Conrad Grebel at the University of Waterloo, McMaster University, and St. Paul’s University in Ottawa—all of which offer undergraduate degrees in Peace Studies. Dean Coburn also played a leading role in linkages which were established at this time with the developing Dalai Lama Centre in Vancouver. At the same time, Carol Retzlaff, Chair of Arts and Sciences, worked to develop a template for core courses and electives which would make up an Associate Degree in Peace Studies at Selkirk College with a focus on Environmental Studies and a Liberal Arts Diploma in Peace Studies with a Humanities focus.

The Mir lecture series was offered for a third year in winter 2006. Coordinated by Liana Zwick, the highly successful series included the following speakers: Jennie Barron on “Myth and Madness: Contemporary Reflections on the Human Place in Nature”; Joan Silvey on “Language, Culture, and Peacemaking: The Call of the Other”; and Linda Wilkinson on “Peace in the 21st Century: Impossible or Inevitable.” And in May 2006, instructors, students, and community members once again moved out into the greening Mir landscape to take part in a “Culture Tour” which involved walking the land, asking questions of the histories which share this geographical space, noting the relationships which exist between traditional plants and human beings. Organized by Lori Barkley, Anthropology instructor at the College and Jose Padilla, instructor in French and Spanish languages, with the creative assistance of filmmaker Ian Dawe—the tour explored the connections which exist between deep culture and memory embedded in landscape.

19 Preparatory work and application for the geothermal systems grant was carried out by Rob Macrae, Integrated Environmental Planning instructor and long time supporter of the Mir project.

The final chapters of this brief narrative history of the Mir Centre for Peace are yet to be written. It now seems likely that renovations to the Mir house—with which the original vision began in 1999—will be completed by summer 2007 and that courses and programs in culture and peace will be offered on-site by autumn of that year.²⁰ These events will mark the culmination of the first phase of Mir history. Time and human practice will reveal what lies ahead.

As Selkirk College approaches its 40th anniversary in autumn 2006, the Mir Centre for Peace occupies a key space in the landscape of collective memory of the Kootenays. Located on a bluff high above the Columbia and Kootenay rivers, situated amongst forests and fields and physically visible to many parts of the community, the Mir house has become a signal landmark in the community imagination, a space held open for the relationships which may exist between community, landscape, and history.²¹ The idea of Mir is sustained by a creative tension between ideas, cultural and spiritual commitment, and the physical reconstruction of a unique heritage building which focuses these human energies. Growing as it does out of the lived cultural and historical experience of the peoples of the Kootenays, the Mir Centre for Peace at Selkirk College has the potential to become a magnet for diverse commitments to peace, social justice, and human rights not only in our communities, but also nationally and globally. This potential may yet be realized in the ideal goal of joining “community and the world” in building cultures of peace.



Myler Wilkinson
Mir Centre for Peace
Selkirk College

²⁰ A formal opening of the Mir Centre for Peace was planned for September 21, 2007—with official invitations going out to the Premier of the province and the Minister of Advanced Education. Stephen Lewis, who years earlier had seen the unique potential of this landscape at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers, was invited to return and speak on issues related to cultures of peace and social justice. First courses were scheduled to be held in the Mir building that same autumn. In June 2006 a Mir Building Committee was formed, and a design consultant retained—Ms. Charlyne Chiasson—in order to ensure that the final physical reconstruction of the Mir house be carried out with the highest attention to cultural and historic values as well as to future educational uses.

²¹ The Mir landscape embodies much of what is implied by the current College Vision statement: a “Vision [which] is rooted in our vivid sense of place that is more than mere location. It is a composite of our people, history, culture, values, lifestyle and landscape.”



Pathway to the Mir Centre for Peace

Mir Centre for Peace, Selkirk College
301 Frank Beinder Way, Castlegar BC V1N 3J1
(250) 365-7292
www.selkirk.ca/about/mir