

“Renovating your studio,
And remodeling your perception”
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Here is a list of things I hoped to accomplish by remodeling my 14-year-old studio last year:

1. Replace drafty garage doors with a solid wall and windows, to make the studio comfortable in cold weather;
2. Put in an insulated sub-floor for warmth and a fireproof floor for safety;
3. Install a make-up air ventilation and exhaust system over benches to expel bad air and heat;
4. Build a closet to store tools when not in use;
5. Replace all wooden benches with metal benches for fire safety;
6. Upgrade plumbing and hoses to state codes;
7. Add a glory hole;
8. Build secure enclosures for outdoor tanks;
9. Upgrade the electrical system to add larger kilns;
10. Improve the heating system.

If I could tell you only one thing it would be that building a glass-working studio is not an easy project. A comfortable and efficient studio is a tough working environment to create. Glass artists are constantly dealing with many problems -- ventilation, sources of electrical power, fuel lines, equipment -- to name a few. There are also many health and safety issues, which I feel are most important to address.

I always admire painters who can bundle up their canvas and paints and create an instant studio in an unused bedroom. They can make an oil painting that sells for \$30,000 dollars with \$100 worth of materials plus the talent of course. In a glass studio even a design that sells for \$30.00 needs \$10,000 or more worth of materials and equipment to accomplish it.

A glass studio is probably the most complicated of all art studios' to maintain and keep up-to-date. When you become a hot glass artist, you also step into a constant money pit. Creating hot glasswork not only takes talent but also a budget that will afford you the equipment, materials, and fuel to see your designs become reality.

To understand why I feel this way about glass studios, let me give first you a bit of history. In 25 years of creating glass art I have had four studios. In 1976 my quest to build a workable studio began. It was good that I did not realize how complicated and expensive an art field I was getting into.

My first studio was in a small cinder block room my father, Delmo Tarsitano, had used to raise tropical fish. It had a low sloping ceiling and no windows. For

ventilation we kept the door open until one day while working on a hot paperweight, two cats came in fighting. Fur flew around my studio as the cats screamed and clawed at each other. I tried to keep working while they fought their way out of the door. After that my father made a screen door. The first of many studio improvements we would make to that studio.

In 1984 I moved to a new home and my second studio was below grade in the basement of an 80-year-old house without adequate light or ventilation. My third studio was a one-car-sized garage on Cape Cod. Our home on the Cape did not have a garage so we built a studio that could be converted into a garage when we moved again. Unfortunately I worked there for only one year when we moved again. My fourth studio, which I have work in for the last 15 years, is a converted two-car garage.

Through trial and error I learned what would work and what would not. Today in the year 2001 there are many fine resources available to find out just how to develop a safe and practical studio. Organizations like the Glass Art Society, colleges, private glass schools as well as the Internet answer many artists' questions.

Over the years, one of my main problems has been affording and acquiring the proper equipment and creating workspace to put it in. Setting up one small torch, a bench and one kiln is simple for starters. However, as your work develops, you soon outgrow the very equipment you came to enjoy using. You need a second kiln, a bigger torch, better glass, maybe a glory hole, or a furnace. The cycle of developing new work and acquiring more equipment begins.

As you advance each year you will want to try something new. Unlike the painter who just buys another tube of oil paint or a bigger canvas, the glass artist needs to do small renovations to studio space to try new techniques. Maybe you want to try pate de verre, or painting on glass, add a blown element to your work or perhaps encase your flame work designs. Each of these takes space and new equipment.

Once you master your new idea, your ambition propels you forward. Coasting on an idea for a while and then starting from scratch will become a routine. As you add new equipment you will start the learning process all over again. Sometimes I am just so busy working that I hate to stop and change my working process. Continuity and rhythm in glasswork is so important that when you are on a roll with a process you hate to interrupt the work to retool.

Adding new equipment can be frightening; my torches kilns and programmers were like old friends. I was used to them; I knew how they worked, and felt comfortable around them. I hated getting rid of my aged Honeywell programmer, even when I needed a new one. For 25 years I relied on it, but like an old car, it was beginning to let me down. When I replaced it I wondered if my new controller would give me the same sense of confidence. In a week or two the new Honeywell controller became an accepted member of my studio equipment family. Replacing your old equipment is a change, but change in a studio is healthy for progress.

If your glass studio workspace is like mine, it is often unsuitable. Lets face it -- most of us work in spaces intended for a different use. Creative rearranging made all my studios into successful and productive glass-working spaces. Each time I moved, I packed up my equipment and made it work in the next place. By the time I moved into my fourth studio I had an eclectic assortment of equipment and furniture all intended to fit

somewhere else. Starting over is very expensive, so glass artists are forced to reuse whatever equipment we have.

My present studio had been built as a two-car garage. At the time I added a heating system, two skylights and a simple ventilation system. I took out the ceiling to create a high vaulted space with an exhaust fan. An electrician installed outlets for kilns, hung florescent lights, and provided controls for fans and other equipment. Luckily the garage already had plaster walls and ceilings. The garage a.k.a. "The Studio" had thin, loose-fitting garage doors, which made the studio hot in the summer and cold in the winter.

In the beginning my studio was not bad to work in. In the winter I used an extra heater and was really into wearing thermal underwear and thick soled working boots. In the summer the heat was incredible and I really "sweated" to make the work. I knew I should do something to make the space more comfortable, but it never seemed like the right time to act. I was always too busy starting a new project or preparing for a show to stop work and rip the studio apart. Financially I was always buying glass and paying studio bills. So, I rationalized that all serious artists suffer for their work, I felt part of a heritage of suffering artists creating art the old fashioned way, by strain and sweat.

As years went by I read in magazines about other glass artists building new studios and saw videos of artists working in state-of-the-art spaces. Their studios were like living rooms, but with a lot of flames. Mine was like your garage with. ... Well like your garage without your car. I began saving money for my studio renovation. After 9 years of saving, the time finally came to do the job properly. But I had to choose: renovate the studio I was in, or build a new building onto my home. After talking with five contractors, Mike, a local builder, advised me that it would be more practical and less expensive to recycle the space I was already in. The decision was made. Out went the dream of the Hollywood studio, I renovated my garage, oops, "studio".

To get the work done you will need an electrician, gas pipe fitter, welding supply house, plasterer, and a welding shop for benches and tables. A good heating contractor can create a studio ventilation system; find one who has installed a make-up air system for a restaurant kitchen. I invited Dickey, the heating contractor, into the studio and showed him my torches, and where I was going to place them. I explained the problems I have directing heat away from me as I work and asked him what he would do to solve this problem. I turned the torch on to show him how the equipment worked. It is important to show your contactors how your equipment works so they understand what you are trying to accomplish.

Dickey, the heating contractor, lit a match near the open torch, blew it out and watched the smoke trail to see where the heat and burned air was going. We then positioned the ventilation system over those areas. Together we came up with a ventilation plan that worked out well and fit into the space. The new vent sucked the heat away from me and out of the studio. A variable fan speed control helped make the airflow just strong enough to exhaust the hot air. Dickey also installed quieter fans to reduce fan roar.

Here are my suggestions for renovating your own studio:

- Make a wish list of what you would like to do and then think about how much you can spend. Have a budget for your project and get all estimates and job

descriptions in writing. For example, I decided to take all wooden benches and tables out of my studio. Dickey, the heating contractor recommended a welding shop that repaired our town's snowplowing equipment. Ron, the welder was terrifically helpful and easily created and delivered steel benches, kiln stands, and worktables at a reasonable cost.

- It costs money to call in professionals but they not only do the work properly, they will also educate you on how to maintain your equipment and work safely and efficiently. Save up and hire someone in your town who has a good reputation. If you go into your town office, the local building inspectors can often recommend tradesmen who's work they like to inspect. The building and gas inspectors usually know the reputable tradesmen in the town.
- Before you start creating or renovating your studio space have all the tradesmen in to see the work site. I did not do this, and it added several months to the project; this was time when I could not work. Instead, I called them in as I needed them, and found out the hard way that letting them all see the space ahead of time, alerts you up front to problems and costs you will face, while there is time to do something about them.
- Always use licensed electricians and gas fitters; never save by doing plumbing and electrical work yourself. Pipefitting for gas is specialized and if not done properly can result in a very dangerous workspace. Comply with local and state fire and building codes for your own safety, putting aside your own opinions about their merits. I hired Norm, the gas inspector for a nearby town to plumb my studio. Not only did he bring everything up to code, but he also checked the completed job thoroughly. He introduced me to Emil at a local welding supply house. Emil was able to fabricate gas manifolds with pressure controls consistent with specialized inspection codes, and Norm installed them in the studio. They worked so much better than what I previously had. During final inspection Norm found a small leak coming from a hairline crack in the seam of one of the elbow pipes and replaced the part before it caused a problem.

As I hired each trade, one person led me to another. Each recommendation solved an important problem I had been dealing with for many years. I found that even though all the people who helped me renovate my studio had no prior association with glass working, their insights and helpfulness were truly a gift. They adapted their knowledge and experience to the needs of my occupation. They had never seen or been in a glass studio before, yet they knew more than most professional glass artists about our process needs. Their talents provided new perspectives, a combination of my artistic needs and their technical knowledge.

The tradesmen understood the very life force of our work: **safety, electricity, fuel, plumbing and ventilation**. The five most important technical aspects of what we do. Partnership with qualified professional tradesmen is essential to creating or renovating your studio. If you can find someone to help you install the five elements above you can build a safe working glass studio anywhere.

Everyone's vision of the perfect studio is different. After many years I have become certain that the integrity of the art you create inside its walls is what really counts. Fantastic work can be created in a crude studio under poor conditions. Yet

technically efficient work without artistic meaning can be created in a state-of-the-art studio. Your studio is your private space to create your world of ideas. You can accomplish big ideas in a small studio as long as you are comfortable and safe working there.

Working in a less-than-comfortable studio for many years did not hurt my creativity. I accomplished many things in my four less-than-perfect studios. Today I marvel at what can be created with so little by so many of us. It is a tribute to our artistic talent and perseverance to work in less than comfortable surroundings and still be motivated to get up, go out into the studio, and keep on trying.