

# Wallbridge & Imrie Architects, Alberta

Six Acres, home and office of Jean Wallbridge and Mary Imrie from 1956 to 1984

Jean Wallbridge (1912-1979) and Mary Imrie (1918-1988) were among the first women to graduate from schools of architecture in Canada before WWII — Wallbridge from the University of Alberta in 1939 and Imrie from the University of Toronto in 1944. They soon registered with the Alberta Association of Architects, Wallbridge in 1941 and Imrie in 1944. With the war raging in Europe, they started working for Max Dewar, architect and inspector of buildings for the City of Edmonton.

In the 1950s, only 37 out of 1,011 architects in Canada were women. Women's entry into the profession can be described as a "journey into a foreign country". In this context, there is no doubt that when Jean Wallbridge and Mary Imrie found each other and formed a design firm, it gave them strength to build a life together as a couple and sustain an active practice for 29 years in what Imrie described to be "a grind in a cold, hard world. But ... it was also satisfying and a lot of fun." (1)

Over that period, they stamped drawings for 224 buildings. Most projects had a domestic component, as was true for many early women architects; these included 67 private residences, 50 apartment blocks, 3 senior citizen complexes, and tract housing for large companies such as Alldritt Construction. They also designed two schools, a youth correction center, several telecommunication buildings and 23 commercial projects.

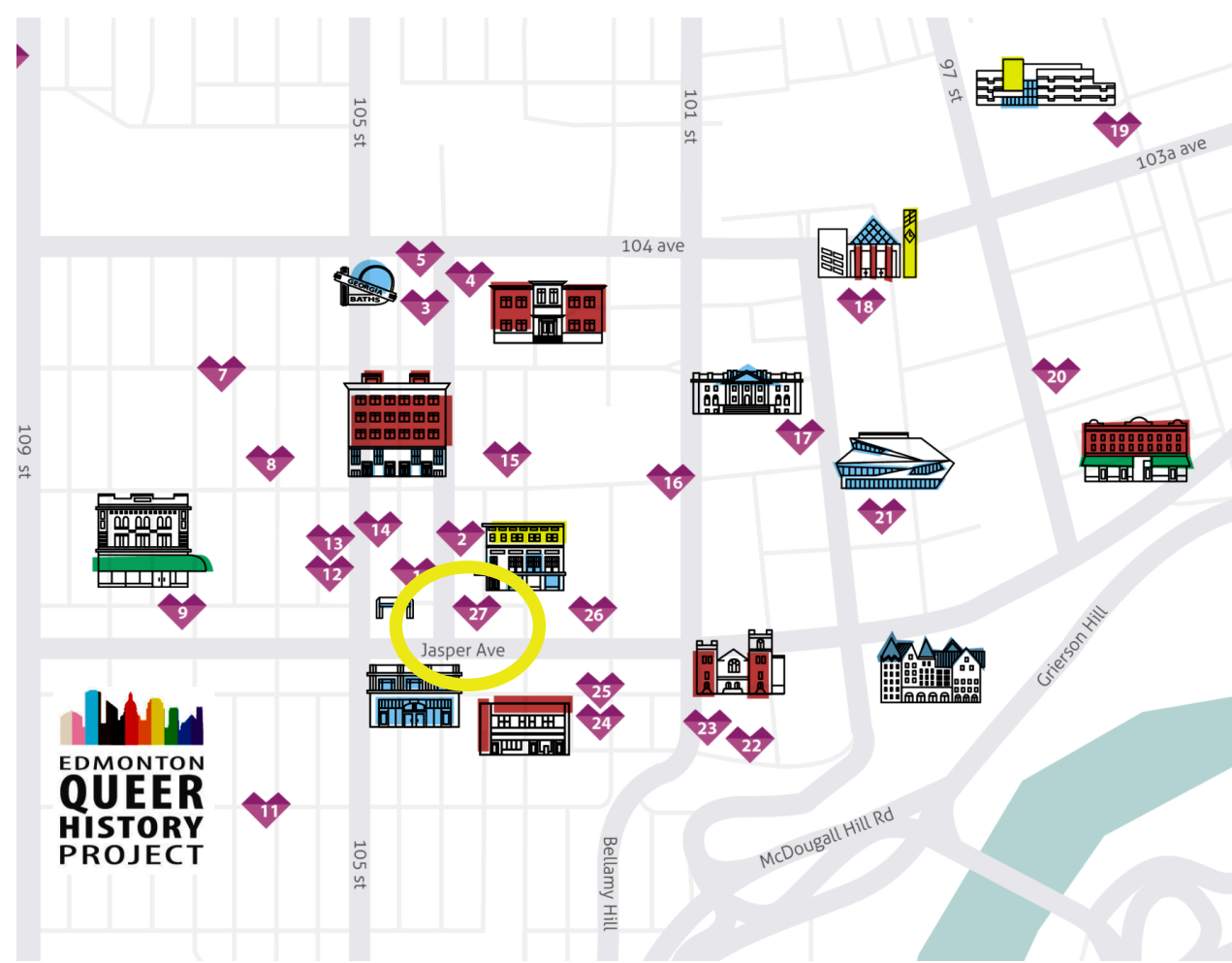
A design firm headed by two women was (and is) unusual. In fact, female architecture students were encouraged to partner up with a male architect and get married to secure a working relationship. Many women architects did just that, as was the case with Doris Tanner — a close friend, colleague, and an early client of Wallbridge and Imrie.

*"They were one person: Mary & Jean. It's true. I didn't know which was which for a long time."*

Laura Tanner, daughter of architect Doris Tanner



Jean Wallbridge and Doris Tanner at the City Architect's Office, Edmonton, 1945.



(Upper) John Lang Apartments (1910s) a meeting place for middle class professional women.

(Immediately above) Edmonton's Queer History Project, downtown map. The office of Wallbridge and Imrie Architects is circled in yellow.

## Six Acres, their Home and Office on the River

"Six Acres, their home and office located on the outskirts of Edmonton speaks volumes on their passion to balance private life with their professional work." It functioned as a professional mask, it acted as a 'double-sided' space, hiding their personal relationship from the public eye, "deliberately arranged and constructed as such by the owners" (5). Much of Wallbridge and Imrie's private lives is reflected in their projects, especially their views on the interconnectedness of nature, harmony, and balance.

## Jean and Mary, Partners in Work and in Life

When same-sex relationships were illegal in Canada, gays and lesbians had to be very careful. Men were often arrested, tried, and put in prison for "gross indecency", and women could be treated for their "disease" in mental hospitals with electroshock or lobotomy. Coming from a wealthy background was no protection. but somehow Mary and Jean were able to keep suspicions at bay.

However, their friends and many clients knew of their personal relationship. The son of a client recalls, "my father explained, what sort of relationship Wallbridge and Imrie had, and that it was not mainstream, but that it existed for both sexes. I was also told that I was not to tell others of the relationship, nor engage in discussions about it, as it was strictly private" (2).

Today, the Edmonton Queer History Project has made Wallbridge and Imrie's relationship "official" by including their first architectural office at 10344 Jasper Avenue on a queer history map of downtown Edmonton. This website tells us more about this architectural firm headed by two women: "Together they built not only a business but a life in Edmonton. Their passion and commitment for each other and their work broke not only a closet door but also a glass ceiling. Wallbridge & Imrie were women architects at a time of male domination in the field and a lesbian couple when such a reality dared not speak its name" (3). This is an important step for the LGBTQ2+ community to celebrate a professional couple, who are an inspiration to queer architects today.

How did lesbian couples socialize and gain the trust of their clients in such a conservative context? Progressive women gathered in places where suffragettes had met, such as the John Lang Apartments on 112th Street. Women-only sports teams got together in the back of gay-friendly Edmonton hotels like the King Edward, Royal George, and Mayfair. Wallbridge and Imrie developed their network of close friends and future clients first through sororities and later through women-only golfing associations. Mary Imrie was a member of the Edmonton Ladies Golf Association – created in 1934 – while Jean, also an avid golfer, served as the honorary Alberta president of the Canadian Ladies Golf Union in the 1950s (4).

Media coverage of women golfers in Alberta's first National Golf Tournament, *Edmonton Journal*, August 1952. Jean Wallbridge was not present for the photograph.



(1) Imrie quoted in Joan Grierson (ed.) *For the Record: the first Women in Canadian Architecture*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008, p.42

(2) George Buck, Personal correspondence with Sarah Bonnemaïson, April 18, 2022.

(3) [www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca](http://www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca)

(4) *Edmonton Journal*, August 8, 1952.

(5) Ipek Mehmetoglu, "Les Girls en voyage": Gender and Architecture in the Travels of Mary Imrie and Jean Wallbridge," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada* 44 (1), 2019 (Jan), p. 8.



# A small practice with a large impact

To the left, Mary Imrie and Jean Wallbridge during a European study tour in 1947

## Wallbridge & Imrie Travel the World

Architects have long valued travel as a way to “gain firsthand experience of architecture”, the Grand Tour of Europe having long been an essential experience for English gentry to burnish their cultural credentials(1). Wallbridge and Imrie though, travelled for other reasons. They took their first trip in the immediate wake of the Second World War. For this voyage — arranged by the renowned British town planner Jacqueline Tyrwhit, then teaching at the University of Toronto — Wallbridge and Imrie obtained a travel grant from Columbia University; asked for unpaid leave from their employer; and were off to learn about the immense reconstruction that was taking place across Europe. Social housing, city centres, new government buildings, the institutions of everyday life — all of these were being rebuilt in the modern style.

On their return to Edmonton, Jean and Mary shared what they had learned with Edmonton’s architectural community, becoming important conduits for the diffusion of new ideas about architecture and modern life, and helping to connect Alberta to the rest of the world.

Below, top to bottom:

Jean and Mary waiting with their luggage in London; Viewing models of reconstruction projects with colleagues; Break time at a seminar in England.



## Searching for Modernity

Wallbridge and Imrie kept their practice small, hiring a draftsman when needed, and working with consultants such as structural engineers for larger jobs. This gave them the independence and freedom to travel for months at a time. Travel became an important part of their practice, which allowed them to engage with new cultures, conduct research, and exchange ideas with architects from around the world.

On their second major trip — to South America — they decided to travel by car. A 1949 Plymouth Suburban (nicknamed Hector), was their reliable companion and sometimes their overnight accommodation, with his curtains drawn. “The aim was to meet South American architects, visit their offices, see their built projects, and attend conferences in order to ‘broaden their knowledge of international trends in architecture’” (2). Wallbridge and Imrie were entirely focused on the progress of modernity in the world. They would search for modern buildings — especially housing — and efficient economic modes of construction. They always stayed in modern hotels.

## “Home” Movies while on the Move

Travelling as architects on a professional mission, Wallbridge and Imrie were graciously received by fellow professionals who welcomed them in architectural offices and gave tours of their latest buildings. Equipped with movie camera and notebook, they enthusiastically recorded cities and buildings, often from the point of view of their various modes of transportation – car, tram, boat, airplane, camels, and elevators. The camera and the mode of transport fused in long travelling shots interrupted by the framing of a building, the experience of sliding under a canopy, or the ascent of a tower as they captured a panorama on film.

After every major trip — to Europe or South America, to Japan or India — Wallbridge and Imrie shared their findings in public lectures, richly illustrated with movies and photographs. They also contributed articles to professional architectural journals, such as the Canada’s *RAIC Journal*. According to Ipek Mehmetoglu, “the written and visual materials they produced during and after their trips indicate that mobility allowed the two queer women to travel between architectural, geographical, and gender-based categories, resisting professional, social, and cultural norms” (3).

(1) Mehmetoglu, p. 9.  
(2) Mehmetoglu, p.11  
(3) Mehmetoglu, p.17



# Home building

Eleanor Cairns Residence, Stony Plain, Alberta (1963-68)

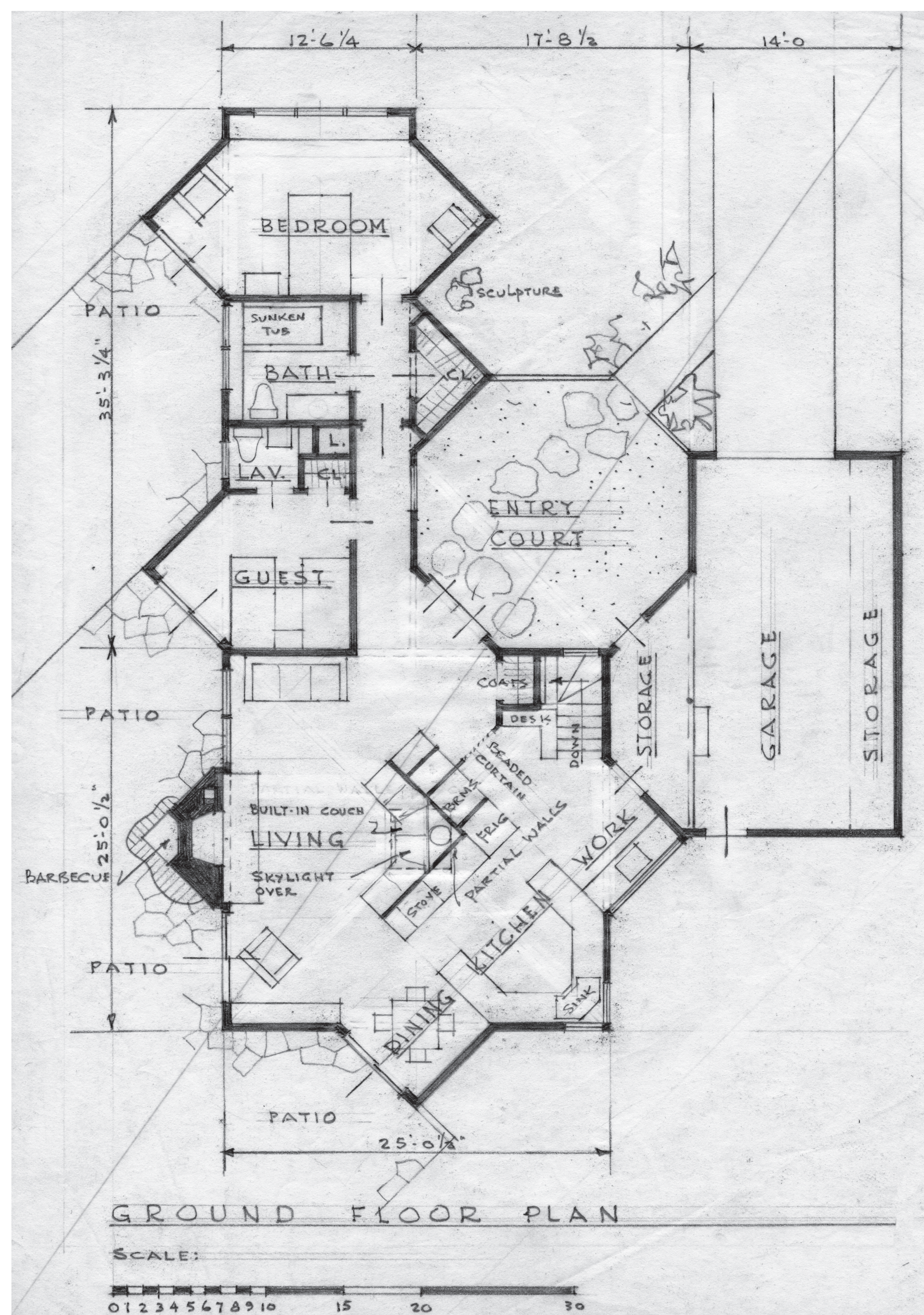
## A True Collaboration

In their projects, Wallbridge and Imrie drew from what they had learned on their world trips, adapted these lessons to the climate of Alberta, and their clients' needs and desires. They also each had their own distinct perspective on design, with their six-year age difference bringing diverse influences to their creative collaboration. In their work from the 1950s, we see a strong presence of Frank Lloyd Wright's "Prairie Style" with its built-in furniture, internal symetries and brick or stone hearths, as well as an emerging "West Coast Modernism", with exposed post-and-beam wood structure, low pitch roofs, large windows and projecting eaves. In the 1960s and 70s, we see them starting to incorporate organic geometries and open systems that allow for growth, under the influence of architects such as Ann Tyng, the partner of Louis Kahn.

Overall, Wallbridge and Imrie's buildings are carefully integrated in their urban and natural settings, in contrast to their Edmonton contemporaries Peter Hemingway and Dennis and Fredda O'Connor, who were more enamored with the monumental modernism embraced by the International Congress of Modern Architecture. CIAM was seeking an architectural language to rebuild a demolished Europe — expressive buildings using the new materials of concrete, steel and glass; high-rise social housing; and satellite towns. During their 1957 tour of Asia, Wallbridge and Imrie "saw the reconstruction of Hiroshima carried out by Kenzo Tange, and the construction of Chandigarh by Le Corbusier, of which they were fairly critical in architectural terms"(1).

Yet Wallbridge and Imrie's projects were resolutely modern, aligned with the structuralist ambitions of Progressive Architects Group Oslo Norway (PAGON) and Team X — exploring prefabrication and modular construction; client participation; and flexible, adaptable spaces that could be added to over time — all in largely low-rise projects suited to Albertan cultural and building traditions. We could say then that Wallbridge and Imrie's work is an antidote to "monumentality" in architecture.

*"Non.u.mental [...] is the expression of the commonplace that might counter the grandeur and pomp of architectural structures and their self-glorifying clients."* - Gordon Matta Clark, 1973



*"Their planning was so precise. There wasn't a square foot you could say was wasted."* - Gordon Forbes, fellow architect

## A Barn-Raising Culture

From clean modern lines to fanciful log houses, Wallbridge and Imrie worked closely with their clients to create a home that suited their lifestyle, at a cost they could afford. This required an equally close relationship with contractors and suppliers. And if a client's money ran out or more space was needed, Wallbridge and Imrie called on the client's and their own friends, and organized work parties to complete the final stages — window casements, kitchen cupboards, gyprocking and painting — until the house was ready to move in. Wallbridge and Imrie were equally thrifty making use of available resources. In their own home-office Six Acres, for example, where they incorporated a small cottage into the new two-story complex. The entire Ross Residence was built out of logs salvaged from a fire at Jasper Park Lodge. To re-use these, one would imagine they had to carefully measure each log and continually develop their design to best incorporate them into the structure.

## Livability in Flowing Modernist Space

Wallbridge and Imrie's houses are distinguished by the amount of sunlight inside and the controlled views of landscapes, and sometimes both of these at the same time — such as their signature detail of a horizontal window casting daylight on to the kitchen counter. They understood how to relate a kitchen to the dining and lounging areas, so it would be connected to household activities while remaining just enclosed enough to hide the dirty dishes.

Employing a design principle that impressed them on their trip to Japan, Wallbridge and Imrie structured their buildings on a dimensional module. This created an internal harmony in the plan, while also ensuring optimal use of building materials. To create cozier and more intimate spaces under an expansive roof, they deployed half- or three-quarter-height partitions to define useable space and provide storage, bookshelves, or places to display artwork, while allowing light and air to circulate through the house. The J.A. Russell Residence is good example — this open plan "post and beam construction in modules of 3'-6" ... pays special attention to climate, with an innovative heating plenum and edge slab insulation as well as sun-shading louvers"(2). It was featured in a 1953 issue of the *RAIC Journal* that was devoted to contemporary Albertan architecture.



(Upper) W.S. Ross Residence, 8731 Saskatchewan Dr. (1951)  
(Lower) J.A. Russell Residence, 14011 101st Ave (1952)

(1) Mehmetoglu, p. 14

(2) Cheryl Mahaffy, "Homemakers: Alberta's Women in Architecture", *Legacy*, 2001 (Fall): 9-11.



# Housing communities

Courtyard, Queen Mary Apartments (1951-53). Photo: Bob van Schaik, 1990

## Community Leagues

Edmonton has long involved communities in neighbourhood decision-making. Many older parts of the city are organized around the idea of the “neighbourhood unit” - that is, a neighbourhood comprised of a gridded streets around a central green space with an elementary school, and a nearby commercial strip. Community activities also took place in these shared green spaces, and these were usually organized by the Community League. Edmonton’s community leagues formed in the late 1910s as a way for neighbourhoods to have a collective voice and demand better civic services at a time when municipal councils were primarily oriented to the needs of developers and business tycoons. The leagues - composed entirely of volunteers - were founded on the principles of inclusivity, class, ethnicity, gender, or religion, and took on the challenge of organizing sport and recreation activities for residents of the neighborhood, and advocating the construction of new amenities.(1)

Inspired by the British Garden City movement, green play space was seen as an integral part of each neighborhood, and in the 1950s, City of Edmonton planners like Noel Dant saw in the “neighbourhood unit” concept the ideal way to move away from gridiron street patterns. Plans for new developments provided a mix of density housing, limited automobile traffic by restricting entrances with cul-de-sac streets, and at the center, community amenities, a park, and a school.(2) In this context, Wallbridge and Imrie, familiar with British town planning, pursued the idea of a shared neighbourhood green space and integrated it into the urban structure of large housing projects.

## Boom Town

During the 1950s, Edmonton grew at a rapid rate. Jobs in the booming oil and gas industries paid good money and young families needed housing. Wallbridge and Imrie designed several large housing complexes modelled on the Garden City idea. One popular model was two-storey maisonettes, each with a front door on the street and a garden door opening onto large green fields, good for play and safe from automobiles. Families grew to love this generous shared “backyard”, where children could be easily supervised by residents, and everyone could enjoy the sense of living in a community.



## Quality Affordable Housing with Shared Green Space

Wallbridge and Imrie’s designs for housing were exceptional for their focus on shared outdoor spaces, such as extensive common lawns and trees. While many apartment buildings have only a strip of decorative landscaping towards the street and parking lots in the back, Wallbridge and Imrie projects — such as Queen Mary Apartments (1951-53), North Glenora Patio Homes (1952), and Princess Elizabeth Court (1954-58) — all enjoyed large green spaces for the exclusive use of the residents. These were certainly Edmonton’s best backyards! Over their career, Wallbridge and Imrie completed more than 50 such housing projects, significantly contributing to quality of urban design, and ultimately the quality of life, still today.

In these housing projects, Wallbridge and Imrie adopted Edmonton’s strategy of incorporating public parks and amenities at the centre of each community. They also integrated lessons learned from their post-war tour of a Europe under reconstruction. Eschewing the vertical towers of Le Corbusier or Auguste Perret, they preferred the Dutch and Scandinavian penchant for connected low-rise dwellings, each with their own front door on the street and direct access to commons in the back. From Stockholm, they learned how just a few simple additions — such as front door stoops and benches, small overhangs, and projecting walls — enabled people to personalize their dwellings, feel welcome at its threshold, and take part in the social life of the community from the security of their own apartment. Such simple gestures can make all the difference in the quality of civic life.



North Glenora Patio Homes (1952). Photo: James Dow, 2007  
Street-side entry to one of the two-story high rental units, set around a long and narrow shared greensward.

Princess Elizabeth Garden Court (1954-58)  
(Above left) Maisonette on garden court, with “fins” marking semi-private space. Photo: Mary Bramley, 1990. (Above right) Shared garden court. Photo: Jim Dow, 2007. (Below) View of the garden court from an apartment. Photo: Sarah Bonnemaïson, 2022.



(1) Ron Kuban, *Edmonton Urban Villages: The Community League Movement*, University of Alberta Press, 2005, pp. xix, 28, 198-199.

(2) Donald G. Wetherell and Irene R.A. Kmet, *Homes in Alberta: Building, Trends, and Design 1870-1967*, University of Alberta Press, 1991, pp. 252-253.





## The Value of Learning

Wallbridge and Imrie believed in the value of research before beginning to design. They investigated what was needed in each building type, sought out the best examples that had been built, and toured them. Such in-depth research allowed them to work at the leading edge of each project, whether it was social housing, educational, or health facilities.

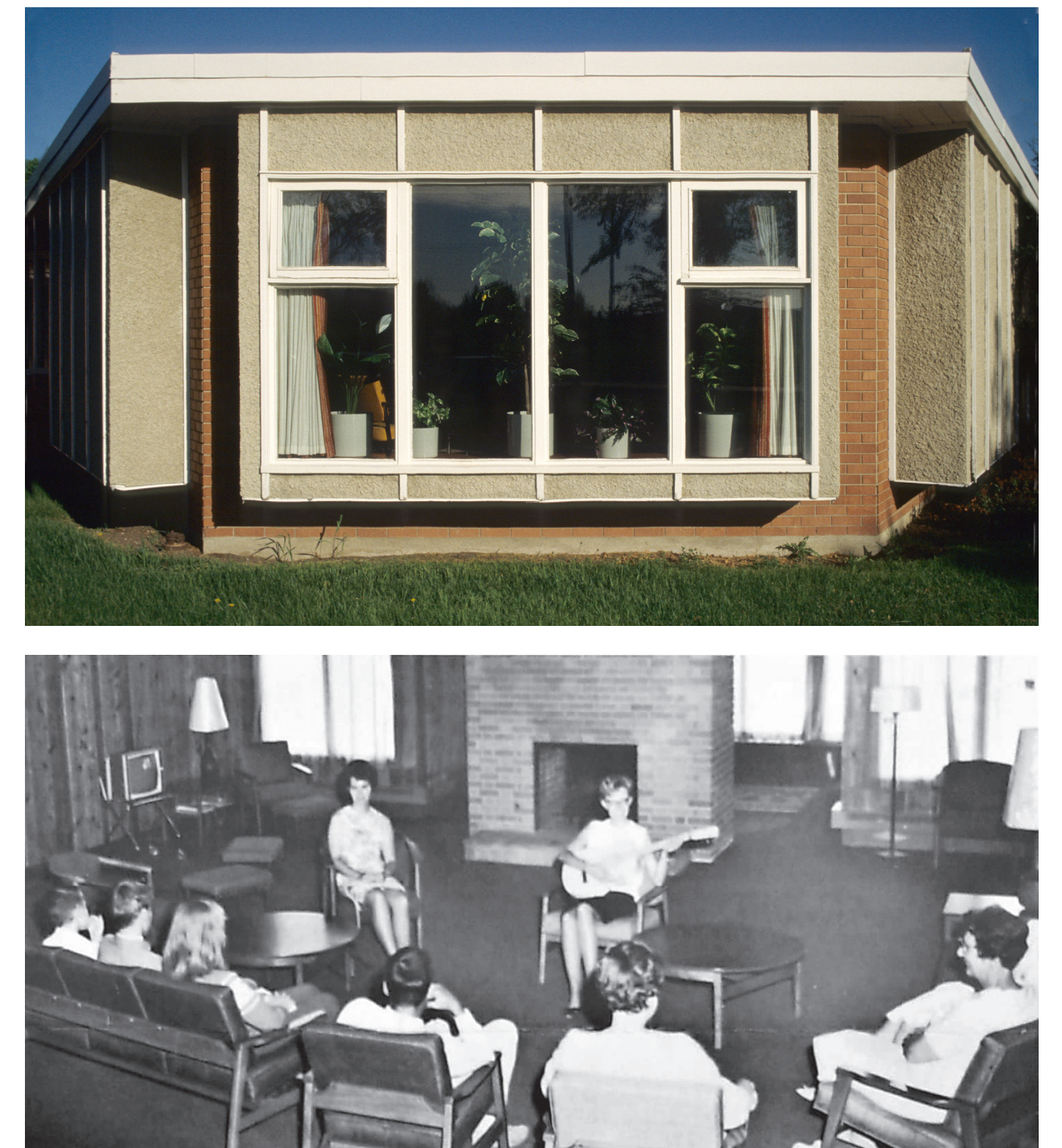
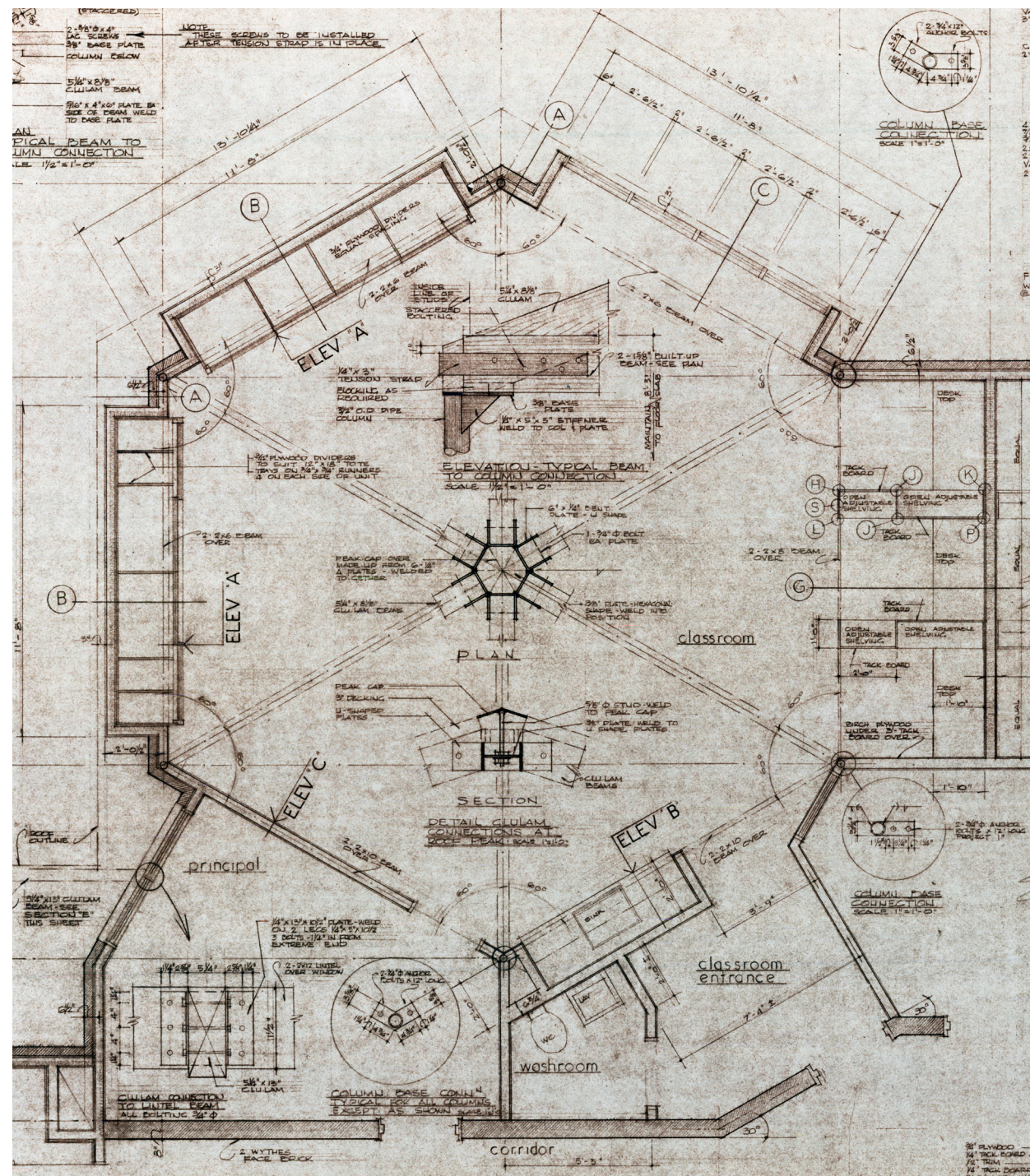
Over their career, Wallbridge and Imrie designed two schools and a center for troubled youth in Edmonton. Each of these projects came with its own learning challenge. Fulton Place Elementary had to be built with cheap, portable units and erected quickly. Greenfield Elementary School had to translate an innovative new teaching philosophy into architectural space. The Diagnostic and Receiving Center for troubled children was required to serve multiple functions, including a communal home, a place for healing, and a place of learning. In all three of these projects, the buildings were conceived as pavilions connected by courtyards and open green spaces for children to play and run around.

*“Mary [Imrie] was always looking to help people who couldn’t help themselves. That’s why she and her partner focused on schools and hospitals. I think they ... felt a great sense of accomplishment.”*

- Mark Slater, Mary Imrie’s second cousin

Greenfield Elementary School:  
(Above) Classroom with view into library, ca. 1970  
(Lower left) Entrance and school bell

Diagnostic and Receiving Centre:  
(Clockwise from below) Rendering of design proposal showing residential clusters and classroom-treatment wing; Bay window with restricted openings; Media coverage “Living room scene in a group home with boys and house parents”(oct. 1967); Plan of hexagonal classroom.



## Greenfield Elementary School

(1968, addition 1971) 3735 114th St, Edmonton  
Client: Edmonton School Board

The school was planned for 480 pupils with the potential for expansion. It also represented the introduction of a new philosophy of teaching and learning, based on the progressive ideas of the educator John Dewey (today remembered for his Dewey Decimal system of cataloguing books). Unsurprisingly, at its centre was the library, and classrooms radiated outwards. A gymnasium/auditorium was used by the public after-hours when the rest of the school was locked. Many of the classrooms were designed as “open classrooms”, others were more traditional.(1) Educator Diane Oberg recalls, “I started my teaching career when ... active learning and open concept schools were very much part of the discourse in education systems, reflecting a ... child-centred education. Open concept schools...emphasized project-based and inquiry-based learning, and it prompted me to go back to university ... to become a teacher-librarian.”(2)

## Diagnostic and Receiving Centre (1966-68) 123rd Ave and 124th St, Edmonton

Client: Child Welfare for Alberta

Wallbridge and Imrie designed Alberta’s first facility for emotionally disturbed children. The complex accommodated around 40 boys and girls between the age of 6 and 16. The program called for two diagnostic units and a treatment unit, and several “home cottages” housing 10 children each, under the supervision of a “house-mother”. The project statement explained that “the philosophy of the institution is based ... on psychoanalytic concepts – the integration of the child and his ultimate useful return to society.”(3)

For this project, Wallbridge and Imrie did a great deal of research. They visited, analyzed, and compared homes for emotionally disturbed children. Sometimes they drew inspiration from what they saw — for example, in the Esther Irwin Home, they liked how the main living room of each unit combined dining, lounging and daily activities in front of a large fireplace; and the kitchen was only a few steps from where meals were eaten family-style.(4) While they wanted their design to create a home-like feeling, such facilities also had to be secure. So, Wallbridge and Imrie artfully balanced such conflicting demands by providing generous windows but keeping the operable vents small; and using low partition walls to give youth the feeling of privacy, and the staff oversight of the area.

The most important spaces in the complex are the four radial classrooms. Here, the children and teachers can sit in a circle and see the outdoors through large bay windows. A wood-vaulted ceiling promotes calm and concentration. The periphery of the hexagonal plan accommodates a variety of other activities. Through out the buildings there are fireplaces, wood storage and fire rings, connecting with both Indigenous traditions and Westerners’ love of the outdoors. Fire draws people together — to find warmth in a cold world, share stories, and find the energy to renew oneself and heal.

(1) Wallbridge and Imrie, Progress Report, 1967  
(2) Personal correspondence, Dr. Dianne Oberg, retired teacher-librarian, 2022  
(3) Statement of Philosophy, 1962, p. 229. Provincial Archives of Alberta 88.290.60  
(4) Children Foundation, n.d., p. 193. Provincial Archives of Alberta 290.60





Donated Land (approx)

Imrie Park Campground

# Wilderness conservation

## Camping and Outdoor Life

When Mary Imrie was 16 years old, her father encouraged her to design the family cottage and supervise its construction. Five decades later, her last design was a cabin for herself on Lake St Anne. Between these two cabins, Mary found a kindred spirit in Jean Wallbridge, who enjoyed the outdoors and the open landscapes of Alberta as much as she did.

When Wallbridge and Imrie moved their office from downtown Edmonton to the outskirts of the city — on a six-acre site near the private Edmonton Country Club and overlooking the North Saskatchewan River — they were able to realize their dream of having both home and office in one place, with nature at their doorstep. When the weather permitted, they played golf at the club next door, or descended the riverbank to swim or launch their canoe. In winter, skiing started at their front door. They also organized excursions with friends for apple-picking, canoeing, or camping. Being outdoors in the company of supportive like-minded professional women must have felt both safe and liberating.

In Wallbridge and Imrie's buildings, one is always aware of nature outside — whether the smallest bungalow in the mountains near Jasper, or a large public school in suburban Edmonton. In their schools and community housing projects, large shared green spaces were the heart and soul of the projects. Their custom modernist houses overlooking the North Saskatchewan River valley were tucked into the descending escarpment, connecting indoors with outdoors through decks and terraces so one could enjoy the majesty of towering trees. They worked with landscape architect Hugh Knowles, who promoted the use of local plants and informal arrangements of curving paths or dry rivers of rocks winding through trees.

Implementing fire-rings and outdoor fireplaces, brought the joys of camping to their designs — such as stars sparkling in the immense night sky, or the northern lights on a clear summer night.



(Above, top to bottom) Jean and Mary canoeing, 1970s; Six Acres from outside (note the two set of skis leaning near the side door); Lower-level office with drafting tables and large windows overlooking the forest, 1954-57.

(Right) Devon Park, a favorite place to put canoes into the North Saskatchewan River. Wallbridge and Imrie often came here with friends for a day trip on the river, ending at Six Acres. Mary Imrie purchased the bluff visible here, which, today, is called Imrie Prospector Point.

(Below) Mary Imrie canoeing on McLennan Lake, northeast of Lac La Ronge in the Churchill River watershed, September 1976.



## Acquiring and Bequeathing Wilderness Lands

Throughout her life, Mary Imrie bought parcels of wilderness across northern Alberta. Sometimes these were purchased to set up camp while working on a design project — like the Group of Seven painters, Wallbridge and Imrie designed their projects in *plein air*. This allowed them to resolve tricky situations, being sure to harness the sun and capture magnificent views, while sheltering from northern winds or hiding unsightly buildings.

Mary Imrie's estate donated their office files to the Provincial Archives of Alberta where they are accessible to researchers. Their Six Acres property (now occupied by the Land Stewardship Center of Canada) and other parcels were donated for public recreation, and are still enjoyed today. You can camp at Imrie Park (216 acres at Devil's Lake), hike the trails at Imrie Prospector's Point (38 acres across the river from Devon Park), and stroll across the Imrie Wetland Preserve on a wooden boardwalk, now part of the University of Alberta's Botanical Gardens.



MARY - IN COMMAND!