The Edge of the Archipelago

Agathom Co.: Molly’s Cabin, Pointe au Baril, Ontario, Canada

The architect owners describe the house, with its wraparound roof, as a ‘wooden tent’, a simple but effective summer shelter.
A crucial consideration in the evolution of an off-grid home is how and when it will be used. A case in point is Molly’s Cabin, on a remote island on the eastern edge of Georgian Bay. The winters are extreme, and few inhabitants choose to spend the coldest months there, although in the summer the population swells and the summer cottages open their doors. From the start, then, the architects and owners of Molly’s Cabin decided that this off-grid house would be used for only three seasons of the year at most. Even so, the project presented many challenges.

The cabin is on the outer edge of an elaborate and extensive archipelago where the islands are made of igneous granite, scraped and sculpted by glaciers,” says Adam Thom of Aphantos Co, the architectural practice he founded in Toronto with his Danish wife, Katja. "Building on an island without electricity that is 13 kilometres (8 miles) from the nearest marina is a challenge, and the building season is short. It’s absolutely impossible to work here during the winter, from the freeze right up to the spring thaw."

The Thombs decided to design and build a modestly scaled, century-old home without the services and facilities that might be needed for year-round residence. Molly’s Cabin, which they describe as a ‘wooden tent,’ has a distinctive wraparound slatted roof enclosing a timber building that spares vernacular and modernist influences.

The single-storey cabin sits on granite boulders close to the water’s edge, with a backdrop of trees. Since all the building materials had to come in by boat, the Thombs kept the palette simple. The timber framework and much of the other joinery consist of reclaimed and recycled pine taken from former Ontario barns; many of the beams are hundreds of years old. The cladding is cedar and the roof is asphalt.

An open-plan dining area and kitchen leads out to a substantial deck, and there is also a sitting room, a library and a bedroom. The principal source of heat is a central fireplace, complemented by a stove in the kitchen. An array of solar panels provides electricity for lighting, refrigeration and the pump that draws water from the lake; a composting toilet is in an outhouse nearby.

“We are impressed by how the building keeps giving,” says Adam. “It’s really pleasing to see the cottage in full use by the whole family — children, parents, grandparents. We wanted the design to create many routes to the exterior, and while the rock landscape is rugged it is also a delicate ecosystem. Despite the pressure of climate change, development and pollution, the region is home to a vast and gorgeous spectrum of animals, many of which are endangered. The project fits our tradition of responding fully to the site, which is a constant theme in our work.”