

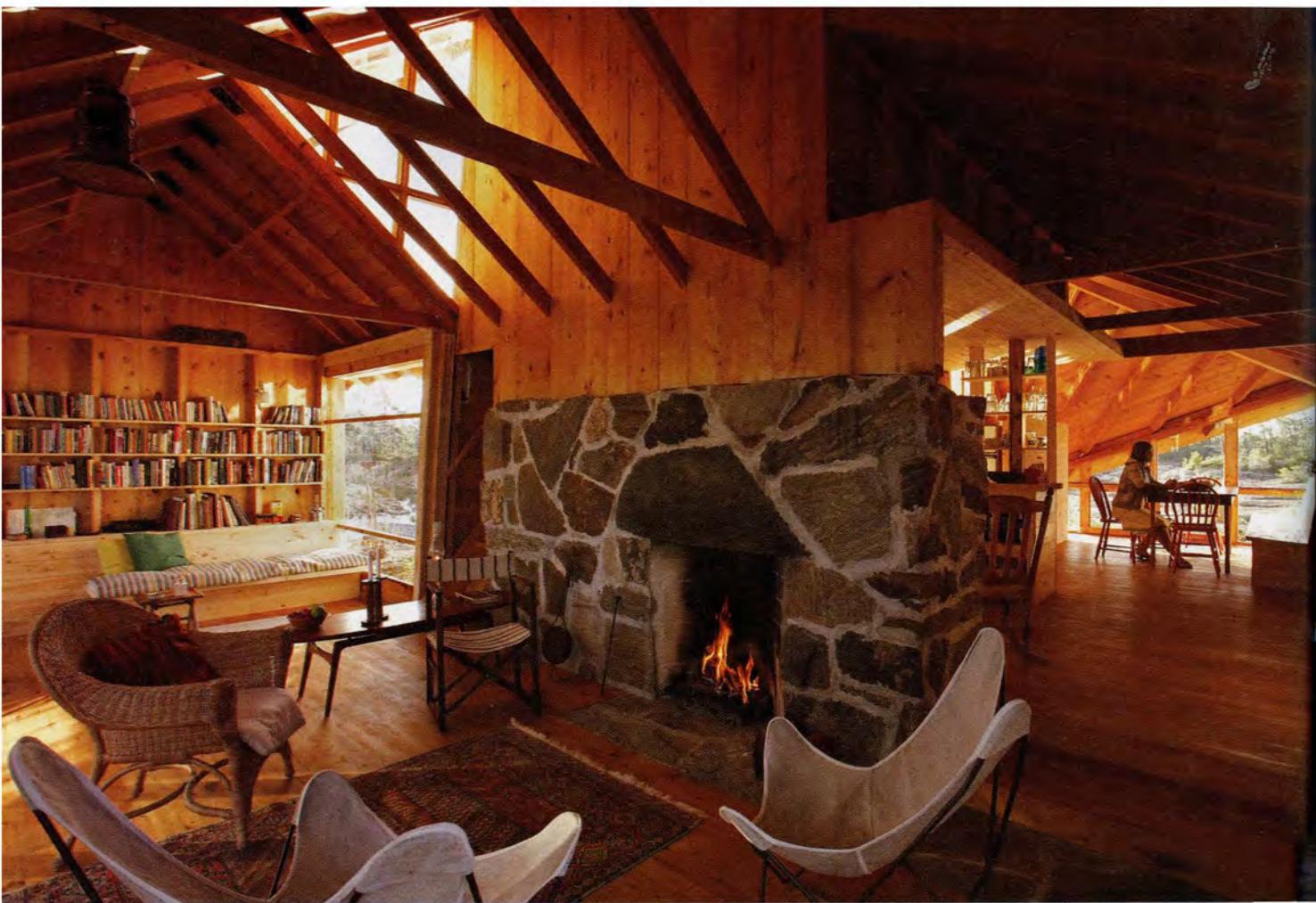
On the edge of the world

By JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
Photography by PAUL ORENSTEIN



Nature's unforgiving elements were the

challenge and the inspiration behind this family cottage



A The Thoms wanted to use the fireplace to create a stone wall that mirrors the face of the rock in the opposite wall of windows (previous page). To give the hearth a campfire feel, it is flush with the rest of the floor. The fireplace is only 30 cm deep, and warms the cottage enough that the family can come in spring and fall. A dedicated place for reading was high on the list of priorities. The built-in "library" shares its space with the living room; the enclosed roof design over this area creates a more intimate feeling.

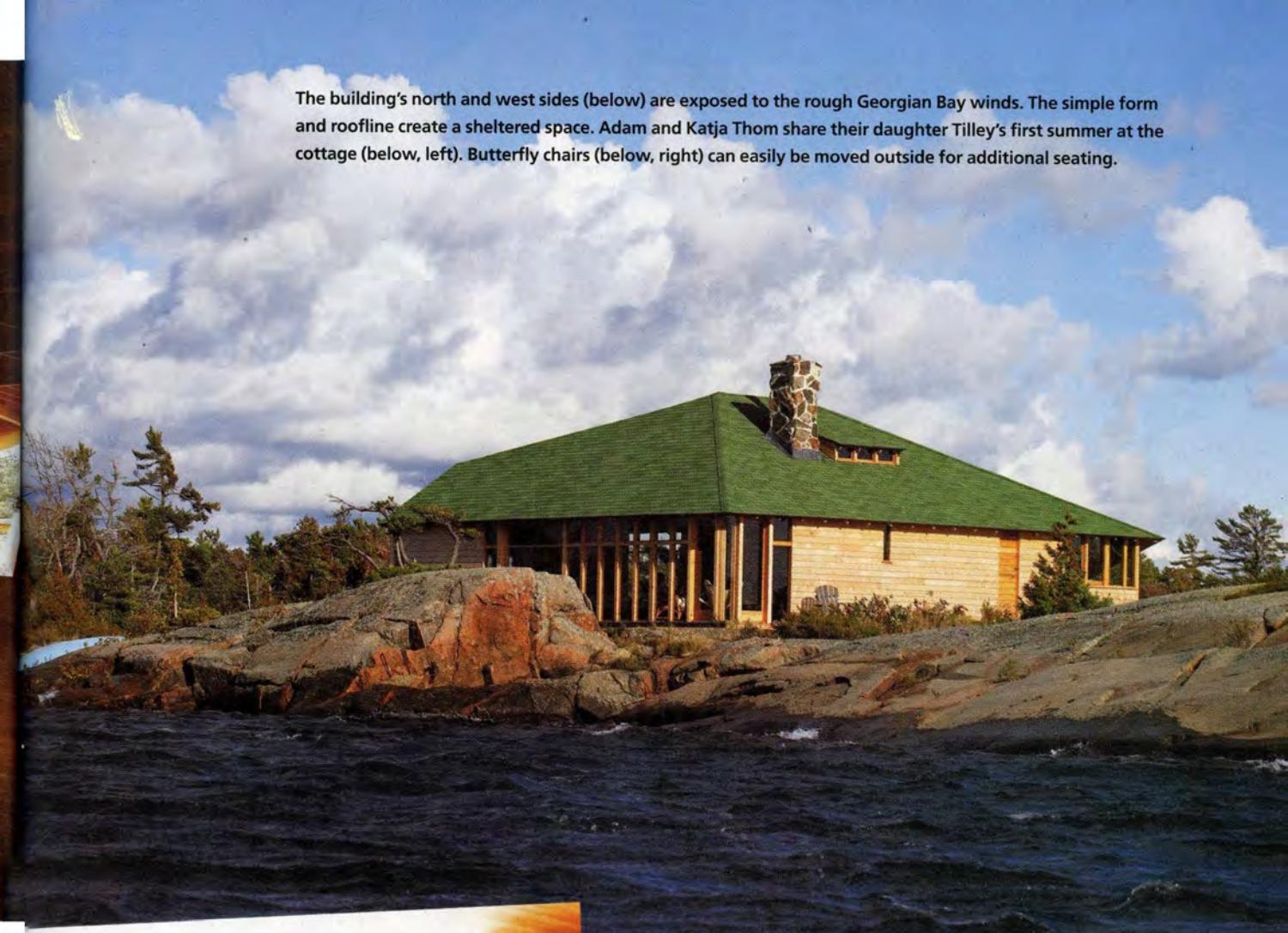
What remains of the original Georgian Bay village of Pointe au Baril – a stately lighthouse, a long-shuttered hotel, a few cottages – is scattered across the islands and headlands of a magnificent drowned landscape. It's a more rugged, less domestic place than many another in Ontario's cottage country. It demands an especially good eye for the weather, which can become fierce in a heartbeat, and the practical knowledge that only comes from a lifetime of cottaging on so beautifully dramatic an interface between rock, water, and sky.

Over many seasons, Georgian Bay has taught its lessons to the Toronto theatre director Molly Thom and to her son, the sculptor and architectural designer Adam Thom. So when Molly asked Adam and his Danish-born wife, Katja Aga Sachse Thom, also an architectural designer, to draw up plans for a family cottage on a 2.8-acre island near Pointe au Baril, she knew what she was getting would be something as unconventional as the natural setting. "It was not to be a monster cottage," Molly recalls, "but something intimate and comfortable. Not just the view of the sunset and the great storms coming up across the reefs, but of the sheltered bay at the back of the island – that was important to all of us."

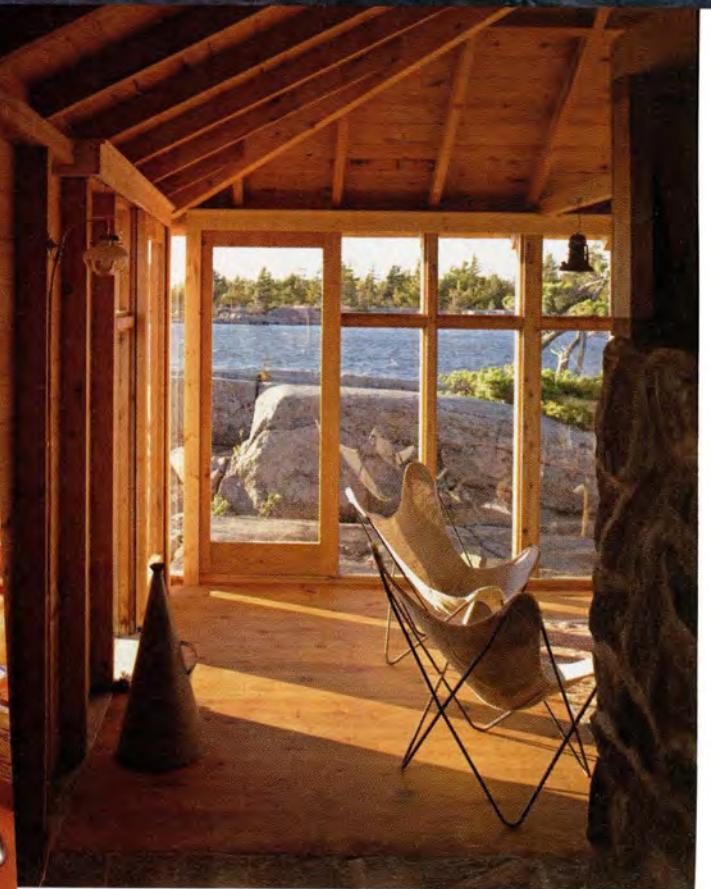
The response of the younger Thoms to Molly's commission is an unusual summer house that, despite its striking originality and very fresh design, still seems to belong intimately to its site on the long, rocky island's rough back.

Instead of hoisting it up to the highest available point – the customary manner of placing cottages in the district – the Thoms have nestled the building among the boulders and stone ribs of the island. Nor have they positioned it forward into the wind, to catch the most obvious, wide views of Georgian Bay. The Thoms had designed buildings for two other sites closer to the water, but decided at last to put the cottage at the back of the island, on the more sheltered end that thrusts its sharp prow toward the mainland.

There, a topography more complex than mere water presents itself to the cottage's windows: a heavily forested stretch of shoreline across the channel formed by narrow LeBlanc Bay, an



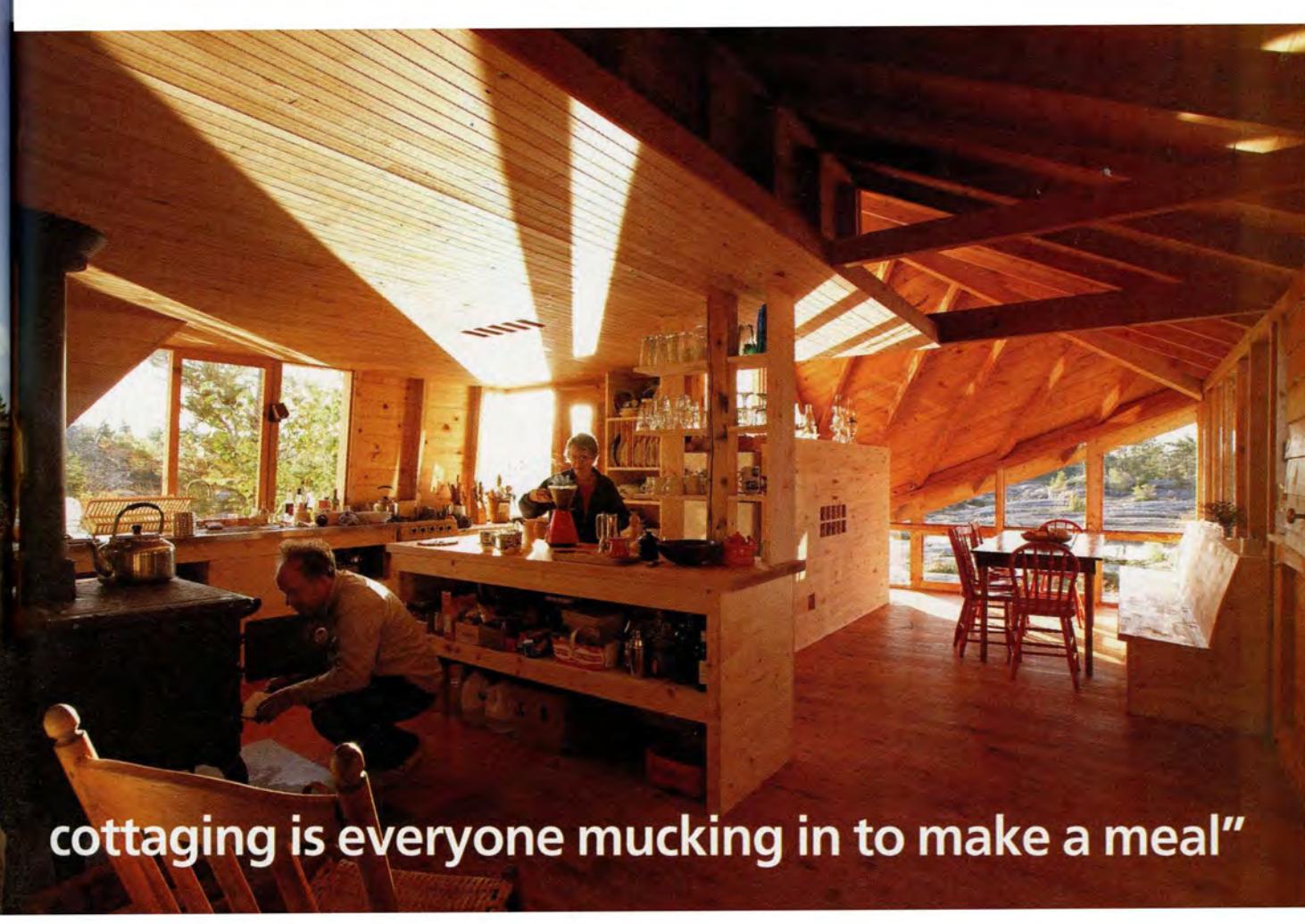
The building's north and west sides (below) are exposed to the rough Georgian Bay winds. The simple form and roofline create a sheltered space. Adam and Katja Thom share their daughter Tilley's first summer at the cottage (below, left). Butterfly chairs (below, right) can easily be moved outside for additional seating.



To create a screened-porch feeling, Adam opens the rolling doors on both sides of the building. Molly Thom (bottom, right) prepares lunch for the family. Because the cottage is not winterized, the Thoms were able to use single-paned glass to build a seamless corner on the window that allows for a less interrupted view.



"One of the joys of



cottaging is everyone mucking in to make a meal"



intriguing watery route into a moist, green realm of marshes and, close by the dining area's windows, lovely little gardens of moss and weed in crevices carved by time into the grey rock.

"I have been coming to Georgian Bay my whole life," Adam tells me. "We rented many different cottages when I was young; I got to experience the ways people cottage here, which is such a rich part of the world. The rocks, the wide open skies – such things give this place its edge. We wanted to be on the edge, so we could experience all the weather." Katja wanted a place to pick blueberries and raspberries, to make pies, and to read – to find the peace, solitude, and expansive natural setting she remembered from a family cottage on a Norwegian fjord. Molly's requirements were somewhat different: "I wanted somewhere I could entertain my friends," she says, "sit on the morning deck with coffee, and book and straw hat. I wanted to have a kitchen large enough for three people to prepare a meal. After all, one of the joys of cottaging is everyone mucking in to make a meal."

When Molly bought the island in 1998, she invited Adam and Katja not only to craft her cottage (which they completed in 2006), but also to share it. The vision it embodies is collaborative and wise, the result of good sense honed by the family's many summers of cottaging in the area, and shaped by the skills that Adam learned when studying at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, and that both Adam and Katja acquired during their professional training at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, in Los Angeles.

Instead of opening the cottage wide toward the open waters of Georgian Bay – something that might be done by a designer with no knowledge of where the storms come from – the Thoms have turned a largely featureless wall against the open water. The cottage's other sides frame the somewhat more docile nature round about, though the emphasis is not on natural spectacle. A sharp plunge in the roof edge – it looks like a tent flap pulled down – allows a peek, but not a panorama, beyond. Even the widest prospect here – off across the channel, toward a fringe of rough bush above sheer stone drop-offs – is still enframed mindfully, carefully. >>

The Thoms wanted to retain the straightforward feel of traditional cottage kitchens. There are only two drawers and one cupboard; everything else is open storage. The open-plan space is defined by its low farmhouse tongue-and-groove ceiling. The room is a combination of materials as well as styles. An authentic Irish woodstove sits alongside the stainless-steel countertop and solid maple island. In the dining area, the roofline drops into the rock to envelop the room and give it a cozier feel without compromising the views. The built-in bench opens to provide additional storage.



Katja stands at the dining room wall that functions as a "piggy back" space: The front has two drawers and 10 wine bottle slots, the side houses the propane fridge, and the back (which opens onto the deck) is a three-door tool-storage area. The wall's height also makes the deck a more private place. Because the cottage is so exposed, the Thoms wanted the roof to not only provide shelter from the weather, but to feel like part of the landscape. Adam's sister observed that the slope of the roof reminded her of the bending pine trees that are emblematic of Georgian Bay.



On the first day of my visit to the place, with wind and rain buffeting the island, I felt these architectural moves provided strong, welcome protection. I had come to a spot that seemed to be out on the edge of the world, very far from the big city I have always lived in and enjoyed, yet somehow familiar. Cozy would be the wrong word for such an experience of place and space. What I felt was closer to confidence. It was the sense of being in a delightfully lonely outpost that had nevertheless been civilized by subtle, sophisticated architecture. In its final form, the building seems to give the Thoms assurance about the safety of even the youngest Thom, Tilley, who was born just as the cottage was nearing completion in the summer of 2006. "We really love being at the cottage," Katja says. "There is no fear about something happening. The stress level is so much less up here. It's wonderful to be able to offer Tilley the tranquility of this place."

Moving around the cottage that first day, as lines of showers swept across the island, I became aware of the numerous ways in which the Thoms had created that civilized atmosphere. The thoughtful geometries, for example, of slanting planes of wall and roof that lyrically collide or slide over each other, then separate to admit small views of surrounding land or sky. There was the intelligence of the wall system, a layered fabric of cedar siding, over thick rubber straps and building paper devised by the Thoms to keep out the rain that drives hard and level off Georgian Bay. I appreciated their artistic handling of these interiors – the various structures, frames and rafters, and surfacings made of hemlock, pine, cedar, and other common woods, but composed with attitude and flair.

And there was the arrangement of the interior spaces: the precise, little step-down from the kitchen to the entertaining area, for instance, and the tight staircase that abruptly appears beside that colossal, efficient Rumford fireplace, tapering up to the loft overhead. The design is a composition of such small surprises, of odd junctures and disjunctions, of features that do not repeat themselves in a genteel fashion, adding up to a recognizable style. >>

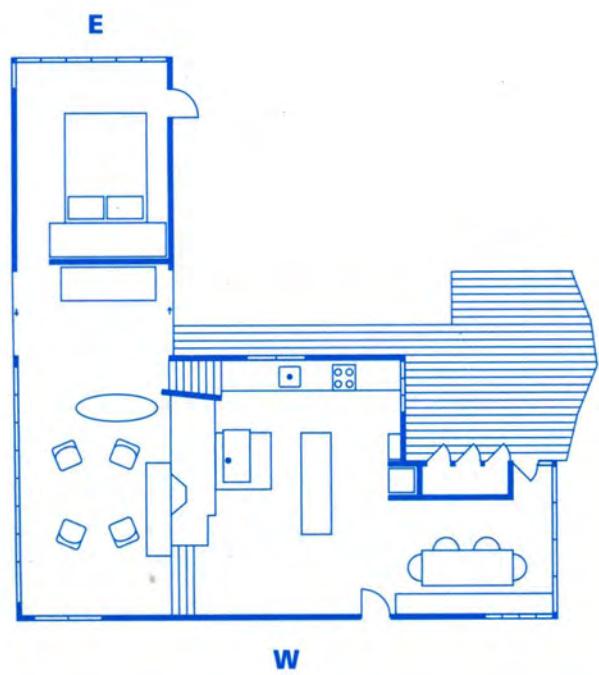


The only bedroom is located at the back of the island and shares just one narrow wall with the rest of the cottage, giving it additional privacy. The east-facing windows were installed at a lower height to keep the morning light at bay. Top: A hole cut into the kitchen island collects scraps for composting.



"It's wonderful to be

able to offer Tilley the tranquility of this place"



But this is not, in any case, genteel architecture. It is architecture that swings to a syncopated beat, that has an improvised, idiosyncratic, deeply personal character smartly out of sync with the dull, ponderous, mansion-like cottages that are unfortunately fashionable in cottage country. The Thoms' architecture is serious in a good and pleasurable way, like chess, or like hard work one nevertheless enjoys enormously.

On the second day I was there, the westerlies blew away the clouds, sunshine streamed through the cottage's many windows, and I was able to get my first real sense of the island and the building's situation on it. Closer to the open water, across the rocks from the cottage, are small sleeping cabins that date from a time long before the Thoms' occupation. (In my cabin was a working Victorian reed organ someone thought of highly enough to have hauled across the water.) The dock floats midway along the island, 150 metres from the cottage. While the Thoms plan to build a more convenient one, it allows the cottage a certain psychological distance from the world of commuting, fetching groceries, and other practicalities.

Though not physically raised above the surrounding landscape of stone and water, the cottage is elevated in the spiritual sense. It is very correct and slightly austere, like a person with old-fashioned, excellent table manners. It is graced by certain vernacular details (the pitched roof of its only bedroom, for example), and it shows its more traditional face to the side of the island where the dock is — where its social connection to the outside world lies, in other words. It is the right size, at the right scale: small (only a little over 1,000 sq. ft.), and attractively assertive, while being in no way inclined toward either vulgar show-off or graceless modesty. The cottage declares in every inch of timber and every architectural gesture its right to be where it is, under the ever-changing skies and in the powerful landscape of Pointe au Baril. 

John Bentley Mays is a frequent contributor to Cottage Life, and has long been a fan of the traditional building styles common in Ontario's cottage country.

The kitchen deck (top, left) is one of the cottage's more sheltered and private spots. Above the kitchen is the drawing studio (top), with a drafting table that allows architects Adam and Katja to visit the cottage for longer stretches and still get work done. They are hoping to get wireless Internet access. The windows in the loft-like space were built specifically to capitalize on the distant views of the inner channels. Opposite: Adam sits in a rowboat named for his wife, one of the many small boats they use to explore around the island.